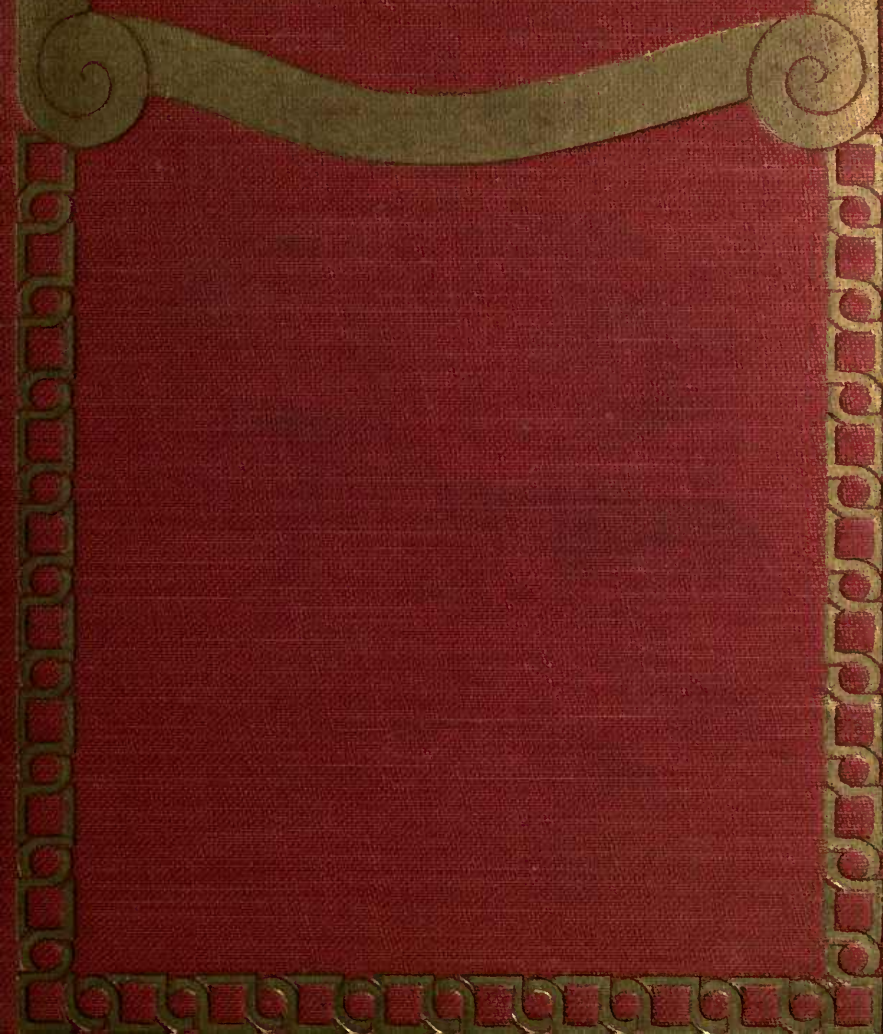


MY LADY APRIL

—
JOHN OVERTON



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By JOHN OVERTON



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MY LADY APRIL

CHAPTER I

CASSILLIS CLEARS THE STAGE

CLAD in yellow linen drawers and jacket, and up to his armpits in the steaming waters of the King's Bath, Sir George Forrest hooked his wrist through an iron ring in the wall, and yawned with no attempt to disguise his boredom.

Beaux, almost unrecognizable in the hideous costume that custom demanded, lounged through the water, cropped heads tied in silk kerchiefs or crowned with the fashionable tricorn. Belles, half-hid beneath chip hats, controlled their water-logged dresses with some difficulty and kept watchful eyes upon the little wooden trays that bobbed in front of them, precariously carrying handkerchief, patch-box and nosegay.

Habitué's idled at the windows of the Pump-Room and the air was full of shouted conversation; sally and repartee; compliment and laughing banter.

Somewhere near, a band played noisily, and

April sunshine, reflected from the troubled waters, rippled and splashed in a thousand jack-o'-lanterns upon the gray buildings.

Through the bottom of his empty glass Mr. Cassillis caught sight of Sir George and leaned out of a window to hail him.

Sir George was not enthusiastic. "Hello, Cassillis," he yawned. "How d'e do?"

"Didn't know you bathed!" bawled Mr. Cassillis.

"I don't," returned Forrest. "That is, not as a rule, y'know. Got a headache this morning. Thought it might do good."

"Aha! Too many libations to the rosy god, eh?" Mr. Cassillis went through a suggestive pantomime.

Sir George scowled. "Demmed popinjay!" he muttered, and, loosing his hold upon the ring, waded through the crowd of bathers toward the dark steps that led to The Slips.

Craning a long neck Mr. Cassillis watched his progress, and presently beckoned to a seedy-looking individual behind him.

"You were asking for Sir George Forrest? Look, yonder he goes to dress. You'll catch him as he comes out if you go round to the entrance."

The fellow nodded, laid a finger to his nose and pouched a shilling.

Mr. Cassillis, sniffing at a pomander, minced away to breakfast in Spring Gardens with my Lady Gillespie, whose portrait he had just completed; and emerging into the sunny day a little later, Sir George found himself tapped smartly on the shoul-

der by a dirty hand holding a folded paper.

"What's this?" said he, recoiling instinctively.

The man grinned. "I've served ye, right enough. Sir George Forrest, an't it? To the suit o' Mrs. Deykin. Eight hundred an' forty odd."

"A writ?" groaned Sir George. "O demmit!"

Much too upset to walk he hailed a chair and was carried home, floundering into his wife's room to find her at her dressing-table sipping chocolate and dawdling over an elaborate toilet.

"O lud, George!" said she. "What need have you to burst in upon me like a bull in a china shop? What's the matter?"

The waiting-woman discreetly vanished.

He flung the paper into her lap and himself on to a settee, threw hat and wig across the floor and swore till he was hoarse.

"A writ!" Lavinia opened the paper and read it hurriedly, biting her lower lip.

"A writ, thanks to your extravagance. I told you 'twould come to it, but you never heeded. You'll land me in the Fleet 'fore you've done. You suggested taking this house and running a faro table. Deuced risky undertaking. I said as much, but you'll never listen to reason. You would try it."

"What else could I have done, sir? We had to have money—"

"And now comes a writ, just as our tables begin to be fashionable. What need had you to run into debt?"

"Great heavens, sir! I must be clothed!"

On the subject of his wife's wardrobe Sir George expressed himself with more force than politeness; and Lavinia was pondering the choice between a swoon or hysterics when her woman tapped at the door.

"Mr. Cassillis to wait upon you, m'lady."

"Demmit, we're not at home!" cried Sir George.

Janet looked at her mistress.

"Beg him to walk upstairs," said Lavinia, and as the maid went, "George, don't be a fool. He may be able to help."

"Gad, he owes us a debt of gratitude!" George brightened, retrieved his wig, and donned it before the mirror. "After all, 'twas I took him up and made him the rage. Why, he'd not one shilling to rub against another when we brought him to Winterbourne and let him paint our portraits. And now half Bath crowds his studio." He turned as the tap of high heels approached along the polished landing. Lavinia had a prejudice against carpets which deadened the sound of feet. "Hello, Cassillis," cried Forrest. "Here's sad news!"

"Take these books back to the library, Janet," said her mistress. "And call at Mrs. Wells' and ask if my red petticoat is scoured. Bring it with you. You may have to wait. And get a yard of blue sarcenet at the shop in Green Street. And leave these notes in The Circus. And as you come back call at Mrs. Darbey's for that pattern I lent her.

And then come finish me. Don't loiter, child. I'm in a hurry."

Annoyed that she was given no opportunity of listening at the door, Janet collected an armful of novels and took herself off. Lavinia fidgeted with the silver-topped jars upon her table; Sir George gloomily surveyed his boots; Mr. Cassillis, glancing from one to the other, murmured something about calling later at a more convenient hour.

"No, don't go," said Forrest without looking up. "We're in the deuce of a mess, Cassillis. Give him the demmed thing, Lavvy."

The artist's pale eyes met Lady Forrest's for a moment. He took the paper from her hand, read it, pursed his lips into a silent whistle. "Eight forty-two. Phew! The woman's done you, somehow. Sure, you can't owe all that for clothes!"

Lavinia's indignant rejoinder died in her throat as she met his glance.

Sir George got up and began to pace to and fro, airing his grievances, relieved that this painter fellow took his view of the matter. He had been half afraid that Cassillis would side with Lavinia. A puppy, always hanging on to some woman's skirts!

"Well, 'tis deuced unpleasant, but nothing worse," said Cassillis at length. "You've a week."

"O lud, I can't pay it!"

"No? Hum." Mr. Cassillis meditated, sucking the head of his clouded cane. "Of all God-forsaken

holes, a sponging house is—the—most—abhorrent. I know. I've tried em!"

"The bad old days 'fore you met us, eh?" suggested Sir George hopefully.

"Exactly."

Sir George pondered the question of how much he might reasonably expect to borrow from Mr. Cassillis, and was dashed by the other's next words.

"The only alternative," mused Mr. Cassillis, "is—ah—flight." For the fraction of a second his pale eyes rested on Lavinia.

"Flight? Demmit, I can borrow—"

Mr. Cassillis looked sideways. "On what security? No, my dear fellow. You don't borrow, you abscond." He waved airy fingers. "Abscond. Ride to Southampton. Take boat to Folkstone. Once there, any smuggling lugger will put you ashore in France and no questions asked."

"Od rot you, man, you've got it pat!" said Sir George suspiciously. "One'd think you'd planned it all out."

"La, no!" Mr. Cassillis giggled. "'Tis monstrous simple. I'll put it about that you've taken the London road. Once in Paris you can start another gaming house and come back in a couple o' years' time positively rolling in money."

"Gad, that's not a bad notion!" Sir George glanced at the mirror and preened himself. At forty-two he was still a personable fellow. "Paris! What a life! Where's Doll? Let's have her in and tell—"

"Dorothy's visiting Miss Abrams for a day or two," interposed Lavinia. "There's no need to distress her—"

"Distress?" echoed Sir George. "We'll tell her nothing of all this. I'll take Charles and go to Paris on business. You wind up affairs here and follow with Dolly and your woman. What's simpler? Let her stay on at the Jewess's by all means. She's well out on't. Cassillis, you'll be discreet? Well, I'll see my man about the horses. The sooner I'm off the better." Amazingly cheered by the prospect of Paris, Forrest nodded his farewell and strode off whistling.

Mr. Cassillis flourished through a bow, straightened up, and as the door closed, tossed hat and cane upon the couch and crossed to Lavinia.

"Well, what now?" said she, rising.

With his hands at his hips and feet apart, he stood regarding her with a curious smile.

She looked up: met his eyes: stiffened into immobility.

"To be brutal, you owe me close upon two thousand pounds already, Vinny," said he. "Did you believe I should be such a fool as to lend you more?"

She remained silent, stone-cold, staring at him with dilated eyes.

"You and I—together—could make more out of faro than do you and Sir George," said he beneath his breath. "Your tables don't bring you in enough to live as you do, and I know a few things about faro that—"

"Not yet, but they will," she said determinedly. "We're just beginning to be fashionable."

"This writ'll ruin you."

"O lud, I can run the house without George!"

"But my dear creature, there'll be a sale. The place'll be stripped. They'll leave you nothing but what you stand in! I dare swear you owe others beside your dressmaker, and when the news gets about your tradesfolk'll come clamoring. What then?" An unconcerned observer might have thought Mr. Cassillis exulted.

Lady Forrest sank into a chair, still staring in a dazed way at the man before her. "I—I thought maybe—you could help," she faltered.

He dropped to his knee and took her hands.

"Gad, Vinny, I'm no philanthropist! Why should I stir a finger to help your husband? I'm thinking of myself—and you. Here's a chance in a million, and are we to let it slip for fear of gossip? You're no child, to be frightened at such scarecrows, and I—"

"You take too much for granted, sir," she rebuked him. "D'ye think I'm a woman to run off with the first man that throws his kerchief?"

Mr. Cassillis got to his feet, dusted his knees, glanced at her, and grinned. "I take nothing for granted, madam." He discovered her hand-glass among the litter upon the dressing-table, and presented it, bowing. "Allow me."

Lady Forrest thrust it away. "You—you devil!" she cried below her breath. "Ah! Cruel—"

"Madam, you amaze me. I am the soul of kindness and—ah—generosity. I give. I lend. I demand no usury. And like Lazarus, I'm content with the leavings from another's—ah—table."

"Cad!" she said vehemently.

Mr. Cassillis shrugged, snuffed, and strolled to the window where rosy chintz curtains obscured the sun.

Lady Forrest looked helplessly after him, utterly at a loss. Never in all her life had she experienced such treatment. It astounded her, but she found something of a fascination in it. Flattery would have left her cold; open courtship had no value whatsoever, being an everyday affair among the gallants who crowded her rooms.

Mr. Cassillis intrigued her.

At the end of five minutes he found her at his elbow.

"Well," said he, taking her by the shoulders, and regarding her with twinkling eyes, "which shall it be? Vienna? Berlin? Rome?"

CHAPTER II

LADY FORREST AT HOME

BELOW the windows of Sir Julian Carew the Bath band serenaded that old beau upon the attainment of his eightieth birthday. An unwonted guggling in the performance provoked inquiry; neighboring sashes were thrown up, becaped heads thrust out; shouts and laughter mingled with the music.

"O lud!" snapped Lady Forrest. "What ails the creatures? Janet, go see."

Her woman stepped out upon the balcony and looking across the street beheld the cause of the confusion lounging at ease upon the sunny pavement, eating fruit.

"Well?" called her mistress impatiently.

Janet giggled. "'Tis a gypsy ragamuffin sucking lemons. La, see the flageolet a-shaking his pipe! No wonder they can't play. Here comes Sir Julian's major-domo to tip 'em."

A pompous old servant descended the semicircular stone steps before Sir Julian's door, distributed silver, swore genteelly at the loafer, and retired.

The discomfited musicians swore with a difference; spat, shook out their instruments, and beat a

retreat, growling; and the gray thoroughfare, splashed with sunshine and the gay green of April, sighed its relief and drowsed again. A black and white cat came up the area of the Forrest house and began a comprehensive toilet, and the gypsy kissed his hand to her and faded into the landscape after the manner of his kind.

Unaware of the cat, Janet took the salute to herself, tossed her curls, tweaked the curtains into place, and collecting empty chocolate cups, flounced away.

As the door closed upon her Lavinia Forrest turned to the woman who brooded, plump and complacent, upon the settee beside the hearth.

"Well, Kate," she invited. "What's this of a new-comer? I heard the bells."

Mrs. Darbey jerked forward. "Why, my love," she quacked, "the town talks of no one else. Six foot, and as handsome as Acheron—or am I thinking of Achilles? And the favorite of his uncle, Sir Julian, though to be sure he's not the heir unless his cousin should—well, well, we must hope for the best. And generous, my dear, to a fault. The dipper told me he gave her a guinea before he'd so much as put his lips to a glass. And he's engaged to attend the ball to-night, I had it from the bookshop on the walls—" Mrs. Darbey paused to breathe.

"A Carew, did you say?" Lady Forrest emptied a trinket box into her lap and chose half a dozen rings, fitting them abstractedly upon her thin fingers.

"Ralph Carew. Sir Julian keeps his eightieth birthday to-day. A great age. Strange, an't it, Sir Julian, the eldest o' the family, should out-live his brothers? Henry died at forty. Raymond at forty-five. Carews seldom make old bones, but they know how to enjoy life. They tell me Raymond was almost a *pagan*, so rash, so willful. Lud, Valerius don't take after *him*! Must favor his mother, I suppose. Spaniards are so lazy, an't they? The climate. Sir Julian don't seem to take kindly to his heir. Dotes upon Ralph. Regards him as a son. Sure, 'tis a monstrous pity—" She relapsed into sighs.

"What is?" inquired Lavinia. "How you do gabble, Kate!"

"Why, my love, my thoughts run so fast I vow I can't keep pace with 'em. What was I saying? O lud, yes! A pity young Ralph an't the heir. So friendly, so good-natured, and *quite* unattached—I have it on the best authority. And is your daughter to be at the ball? A sweet child. I wonder—" Mrs. Darbey's small gray eyes brooded certain romantic possibilities.

"And the cousin," inquired Lavinia. "Is he married?"

"Valerius? What an unfortunate name! Sounds like a medicine! Married? O lud, no! As well expect an oyster to fall in love. Poor creature!"

"Deformed?" suggested Lady Forrest, smothering her exasperation.

Mrs. Darbey snooped forward like a duck in a gutter. "Heavens! You don't tell me," she gasped, round eyes protruding a little. "Well now, 'tis not remarkable. He's not crippled. I saw him but yesterday on the Parade. A lanky, languid fellow, monstrous over-dressed, and so bored he seemed ready to fall asleep as he walked. What's the defect?"

"Oh, nothing," replied Lady Forrest. "Don't jump to conclusions, Kate."

"And how is dear Sir George? I han't seen him about this age!"

It appeared that dear Sir George had posted to London a week ago on urgent business. Skillful questions elicited the information that Lavinia might possibly have to follow him, and that Dorothy would visit in the neighborhood until her parents returned.

"No bad news, I trust?" Mrs. Darbey was avid for detail.

"O la, no!" yawned Lavinia.

"Family matters, perhaps?"

"Yes. Monstrous boring, an't they? I protest I hardly know whether a family wedding an't worse than a family funeral. And how I detest wearing black."

"Ah!" Mrs. Darbey hit the trail at last and beamed her satisfaction. "Well, I hope 'tis a legacy."

Lavinia allowed her to hope but changed the subject adroitly, and various reputations in Bath were

under dissection when the maid appeared, wide-eyed.

"Mr.—Everett, m'lady," said she, plaiting the hem of her pinner.

Lady Forrest turned sharply and recognized a danger signal. "Lud, how tiresome men are! Did you tell him I was engaged?"

"Most particular, m'lady. But he said 'twas important."

"What's o'clock, child?"

"'Tis close on twelve, m'lady."

"O lud!" quacked Mrs. Darbey, rising hastily. "And I vowed I'd meet Lady Sue at noon!" She collected her fan, her muff and her silk bag; preened herself and made her adieu, explaining at great length that she had missed half a dozen appointments in order to visit her sweet Lavvy.

Her sweet Lavvy pecked at her, smiled mechanically, and nodded to her woman.

Janet reappeared a moment later.

"Who is it?" asked her mistress.

"A rough-looking fellow, m'lady. He got his foot in the door 'fore I could slam it. He's a-sitting in the dining-room."

"Did Mrs. Darbey see him?"

"La, no, m'lady. I took good care o' that!"

Lady Forrest exchanged her wrapper for a gown and descended to make acquaintance with the genus bailiff. It was not a pleasant experience. Bartholomew Griggs prided himself on his manners with women.

Revolted, Lavinia escaped to her boudoir and summoned Janet, but when the maid came her mistress for once found nothing to say.

The two women looked at one another.

"If quite convenient to you, m'lady, I should wish to leave, not being accustomed to having the bumbailey a-sitting in my dining-room, as it were." She was prepared for reproaches.

"It's very well," assented Lady Forrest, outwardly composed. "Be good enough to lay my pink taffety ready for to-night. And Janet, say nothing to Miss Dorothy. I'll not have her disturbed. She'll sleep till five, and then you may dress her for the ball. Order a chair for six o'clock."

She turned to her desk and chose a pen, trying the nib upon a finger-nail.

"But, m'lady, do we open the rooms to-night as usual?" gasped Janet, never able to understand her mistress's self-control, and invariably losing her head before Lavinia's icy restraint.

"Of course."

"But the—"

"He can sit in the pantry. See that he has a good supper and plenty of ale, and Janet—you may lock him in. I'll not have him coming upstairs among my guests."

Impressed, Janet retired; dusted the gaming-rooms upon the first floor, replenished the candlesticks, and descending, set glass and china ready in the dining-room.

Bartholomew Griggs, writing laboriously in a dirty pocket-book, dogged her steps.

"Get out from under my feet, I tell ye!" said Janet at length. "You'll get trod on. What are you at?"

"Tottin' up the furniture, missie," rejoined Griggs. "What's the lay? Party to-night?"

"Ho, no more'n usual!" said Janet, breathing on a spoon and rubbing it vigorously.

"We entertain lavish, don't we?" chuckled Griggs. "Let's see. Cut glass aypernay badly chipped on foot. Four, eight, twelve, sixteen—ecod! how many o' them long-legged glasses?" He sucked his pencil and eyed the table appraisingly.

"Keep your fingers off 'em!" snapped Janet, ostentatiously polishing.

"Oh, bless your heart, I an't doin' no damage. But anything to obleege a lady." He smirked at her and pottered round the room, examining the gilded mirrors and muttering to himself. Janet, watching him sidelong, was suddenly concerned about her wages. It became imperative to know what would happen in the course of the next few days.

"Well," said she more amicably. "I'm for the town."

"Shopping?" queried Griggs.

"Ordering the supper," she told him. "What's your fancy?"

Bartholomew owned to a passion for trillibub.

Janet sneered. "We'd have the gentry take this for a tripe house! Choose something that don't stink, man! Onions, indeed!"

"Most things as is tasty smells," mused Griggs, scratching one ear. "And I do love something tasty. What about oysters, miss?"

Janet signified approval and invited him to come carry her basket.

"Can't leave, me dear," Griggs wagged a shabby head. "I'm in possession, an' here I stays till the sale's over. Nothing's to be took away, d'ye see. I'm responsible. I doubt I should let ye take a basket strictly speakin'—"

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Janet. "D'ye expect me to carry oysters in my apron?" She flounced off, donned cloak and hood and hurried in to the town, where passing an apothecary's, she developed a raging toothache and dived down three steps into the little shop.

"Something to make you sleep?" said the assistant, leaning solicitously over the counter. "Better let me draw it, miss, and ha' done with it."

"Oh, 'tis but a cold," said Janet, her hand to her cheek. "I'll take two powders, please. Do they taste badly?"

"Put 'em in your supper beer and you'll never know you've had 'em," he assured her.

Dressed, perfumed and painted, Lady Forrest went on a tour of inspection through morning-room and dining room, where refreshments were spread

upon long tables, and servants, hired only for a few hours each night, waited napkin in hand.

The rooms set aside for gaming occupied the whole of the first floor. Lavinia glanced in and found Janet distributing new packs of cards.

"Where's that man?" she inquired.

The abigail looked up. "He's had his supper and he's asleep in the butler's pantry, m'lady."

"Did you lock him in?"

"No, m'lady. I did better. He'd ha' kicked the door down and raised a monstrous racket. I put a sleeping powder in his ale. He's safe till morning."

Lady Forrest stopped suddenly, a finger at her lip.

"You're certain he'll not wake?"

"Oh la, yes!" returned Janet. "The pottecary vowed one would ensure a good night's rest. I gave him two."

"'Tis very well. I shall close the rooms early to-night, child. My head aches. You needn't sit up for me."

"Thank you, m'lady."

Lavinia idly picked up a pack of cards, cut, and glanced at the result. The Queen of Hearts. Her fate was sealed.

Oddly at ease now that her decision was made, she left the gaming-rooms, and climbing the stair to an attic bedchamber, entered without ceremony.

Her daughter Dorothy stood upon a chair before the toilet-table, examining her slippered feet in a

small mirror, and turned pettishly as Lady Forrest came in.

"What on earth—?" began Lavinia.

Dorothy shrugged and descended. "If I am to be your decoy you might at least give me a long glass," she pouted. "For all I know my petticoat's inches below my gown, and half the urchins in Bath will be shouting that my father loves me better than my mother."

Lavinia winced a little. "Janet should dress you."

"Janet neglects me shamefully. When can I have a woman of my own.

"'Tis too costly, child," said her mother, eyeing her. "You're exquisite. Come, control your temper, or you'll ruin your mouth. There's nothing lines a face like ill-humor. Remember that, miss!"

The young girl lifted a candle in each hand and gazed into the mirror, scrutinizing herself as though her reflection had been the picture of a third person.

A fair-skinned, oval face confronted her; golden hair caught up in distracting curls, frosted with powder; blue eyes shadowed by heavy lashes; a patch below a dimpled mouth.

"Well," said Lady Forrest complacently, "you're the prettiest girl in Bath. Make the most of your time, child. We Bridlingtons age early."

"O me!" cried Dorothy. "My time, forsooth! 'Tis little chance I have. I'm nothing more than a bait, and I'm tired of it! I want—"

"You want a master, eh?" sneered her mother, and caught her wrist in thin, cruel fingers. "Are you so enamored of your glimpses of married life that you want to rush into the trap? Little fool! Now attend—Sir Julian's nephew will be at the Rooms to-night. Ralph Carew. Remember the name. He must be induced to play here to-morrow. To-morrow! You understand? What, have I bruised your wrist? Well, tie a black ribbon round it, 'tis the last fashion."

Ignoring Dorothy's half-uttered remonstrances, Lady Forrest sailed downstairs, telling herself that she had done all that could be expected of her. She had secured Dorothy's future, for young Carew could not fail to fall captive to so much beauty in distress.

The beauty was there for all to see: the distress, alas, was inevitable. Lady Forrest had no intention of taking a grown daughter to Vienna. The chit knew her world. She could look after herself. Lavinia grudgingly acknowledged that she must leave her some money.

A gathering hum of talk below told that her doors were open, but she sat down at the bureau, wrote a letter, enclosed some gold, sealed it, addressed it to Dorothy and slipped it into her pocket. Then, throwing a scarf about her shoulders, she descended to the drawing-room, aglow with candle-light, almost impassable for chairs and card-tables. A larger table was set in the farther room, exposed by the folding doors; and habitués

were already hurrying to their seats, greeting acquaintances, their eyes set abstractedly.

In spite of herself, she shivered.

It was as though, dead, she watched her world move on without her. Her reign in Bath was over. After to-night her candles would remain unlit, her rooms empty. Her flight would cause no more than a surface ripple on the life of the town. Shrugs, leers, a half-uttered sentence—and she would be forgotten. Another would start a gaming-house, defying law and order. Jealousy of her unknown supplanter sickened her: she loved the life she led, the little power she wielded. She loved the atmosphere of excitement, of risk, of delicious uncertainty. It was hard to give it up at the moment when half the fashionable world of Bath flocked to her tables. She was too old to begin all over again in another country.

Almost she resolved to stay on and brazen matters out, and remembered that before many days were over the furniture, the glass and china, the very clothes she wore would be sold to pay her debts.

Flight was unavoidable, and flight with Cassillis preferable to flight alone. She waited with what patience she could muster until her guests went down to supper; and then, alone among the disordered chairs, she faced Cassillis.

"What now?" he asked. "Have you decided?"

"It must be to-night," said she, composed, pale beneath her rouge. "There's a bailiff in the house—wait! I've no time to explain—my woman's

drugged him. I'll stop the play at half after ten, and then—"

"You'll come! I'll have a chaise under the big cedar on the London road at eleven. I'll to my lodging, and pack. We must get away before Dorothy comes home. What'll the child do?"

"Oh, I've arranged for Dorothy," Lady Forrest assured him. "Till eleven!"

They separated with a handclasp. Mr. Cassillis found hat and cloak and let himself out of the house.

Lady Forrest sailed down to supper.

CHAPTER III

INTRODUCING THE HERO

“**S**IR,” said young Carew, “your very good health!”

The old man seated at the head of the shining table gazed bleakly up at the young man, bowing, glass in hand; gazed, smiled, and sighed.

“Thank’ee, lad. Thank’ee. But don’t wish me many happy returns o’ the day. ’Tis not to be desired. Eighty! Great heaven, and it seems but yesterday that I was eighteen!” He fell silent, twirling his empty glass by its twisted stem.

Young Carew stretched out his hand impulsively and pressed his uncle’s withered fingers. “Gad, sir! You bring the tears into my throat,” he said. “I regard you as a second father. I—I can’t lose you—yet.”

Sir Julian grinned. “You managed to exist a couple o’ years without me.”

“Only because you refused to come, sir!” exclaimed Ralph, flushing.

“Pho! The Grand Tour at seventy-seven! I’d ha’ been damnably in your way, lad. There, I was but plaguing you. You’re a good boy, but how goes the song?”

'Crabbed age and youth—'

"Let's see. You must be three and twenty?"

"Twenty-four, sir."

"Twenty-four. Gad, you've all life before you. And heart-whole, eh? Ha, Bath'll soon mend that! Running over with pretty maids. You can take your pick of a posy. We'll have you wed 'fore the year's out."

The prospect did not seem to appeal to young Carew. "You never married, sir," he began.

Sir Julian moved uneasily in his great chair. "No, lad, no. I never married. But 'tis the only proper life for a man—or woman either, for that matter. It is not good for man to be alone. Ah, you love your freedom, but wait till you face a lonely old age. You must do better than I. I'll live to dandle your son, please God."

"I'll endeavor to oblige you, Uncle," laughed Ralph. "But there's no haste, is there?"

His uncle glanced at him. "No, no haste. Still, I'd like to see ye wed. Well, ha' ye seen aught o' Val? I bid him dine with us, but it seems he has forgot."

"No, I've not met with him as yet," replied Ralph. "How does he spend his time? He appears to have no interests. I—made inquiries—but—"

"Devil take me if I understand the fellow!" cried Sir Julian irritably. "He comes and he goes as the whim seizes him. In and out o' the house

every day for a week, and then never a sight of him for month on end. And then one day he lounges in as though he could scarce drag one foot after t'other, and sprawls all over the furniture in most unseemly fashion for a man of breeding. And never a word of explanation or apology. Strange? Rat me, I think he's a fool, or mad! Raymond was crazy to take a foreigner to wife!"

"He was named at the chocolate house in my presence," said Ralph. "I mentioned our relationship and asked—er—where he could be found. If you'll believe me, sir, the room positively shouted with laughter. I wondered—"

Sir Julian condemned his kinsman feature by feature: swore he was no Carew to make the name a byword and a laughing-stock: thumped angrily on the arms of his chair with clenched fists upon which the knuckles stood out whitely: and was with some difficulty soothed by young Carew who became a little alarmed at his uncle's unbridled rage, and strove to lead his thoughts into another channel.

"D'ye go to the ball to-night?" asked Sir Julian at length, sipping his wine and leaning back still flushed with his recent vehemence.

"Not if you'd like me to remain, sir." Ralph shot a furtive glance at the tall clock in the corner.

"Pho! No. I'm no spoil sport!" declared Sir Julian. "Come now, what d'ye think o' the fight to-morrow? What's this I hear of a boxing gypsy?"

"Merodach? Faith, I've not seen him, sir. I know nothing but gossip. The odds were in his

favor in Orange Grove this morning, but being new come to Bath I'm all at sea. From what I could gather the other's the safe man."

"Brooke?" mused Sir Julian. "Ah, he put up a good fight five years ago. I doubt he's too old for it now. Well, Harris, what is it?"

The major-domo bowed, holding the door. "Mr. Valerius, sir, to pay his respects."

The baronet's heavy gray eyebrows drew together as a pale figure lounged into the circle of candle-light: a tall exquisite clad in creamy satin, fair hair falling in curls about his powdered cheeks.

"What, candles?" said he in some surprise. "'Tis still daylight—"

"I prefer to dine in private," grumbled Sir Julian. "That Forrest woman across the way is for ever peering at me from the windows. Shameless baggage! I draw my curtains 'fore I sit down. What, sir! I bid ye dine with me and here ye come nigh two hours late. An't my table dainty enough to suit your stomach?" He snatched his fingers away as his nephew bent to kiss them. "Od rot ye, man! I'll not have your foreign tricks! Shake hands!"

"Sir, I tender a thousand apologies—"

"Pho! One's enough, one's enough."

"'Twas impossible to dine, I—"

"Then ye'll wine. Harris, another glass."

Valerius Carew waved the servant away. "I protest, sir, my—my doctor positively forbids it." He sank into a chair, a laced kerchief at his lips.

"Zoons, Val, are ye ill?" quoth his uncle testily. "What's a glass o' port more or less? Ye look hale enough!"

"Appearances, my dear sir," drawled Valerius, putting long legs across the seat of another chair, "appearances are not always to be relied upon." His languid eyelids flickered: a smile twitched at the corner of his fine mouth. He looked across at his cousin. "Well, coz, and so we meet at last! You must have left England as I landed. Ah, the Grand Tour? And you return a polished rolling stone! No moss about you, Ralph, eh? I like your taste in waistcoats. Paris? Gad, what a hole this town must seem after Paris? Positively a hole! A wallow full of wallowing fat cattle!"

"Don't ye sneer at Bath, sir!" expostulated Sir Julian, thumping the arm of his chair.

"O dear sir, Truth's at the bottom o' the well. I looked in at the Pump-Room this morning and the King's Bath was full—positively full of—of prodigies in yellow calico, wallowing. Faugh! A fearsome spectacle! What brings you to Bath, Ralph? Rheumatism?"

"I came post from London to congratulate Sir Julian," said Ralph coldly, staring with ill-concealed disgust at his foppish kinsman.

"Congratulate? O lud, and I forgot! Sir, a thousand pardons! What a moongazer I am!" He took the old man's hand and shook it warmly. "Happy returns, Uncle! And may your dearest wishes come home to roost!"

"Thank'ee, Val. Thank'ee." Sir Julian thawed a little. "Well, ha' ye news o' the fight?"

Valerius was obviously at a loss. "Fight? Oh, to be sure. I hear Sir Harry's bird won him close upon three hundred guineas. Killed two cocks as dead as mutton, and so mauled another that they wrung its neck. Oh, a very devil, I assure you."

"Zoons, I'm not talking of cocking! The fight, man! The big fight to-morrow. Brooke against some dark horse of a gypsy. What d'ye make of it?"

"Oh," drawled Valerius. "Boxing? Gad, I'm no oracle." He examined his nails with care, breathed upon them, polished them with a laced kerchief, and broke into a high-pitched giggle. "What d'ye think? Old Lady Kirkpatrick lost her snuff box at the Rooms last night, and when 'twas found 'twas full of—"

"Od's bud!" Sir Julian thumped angrily upon both arms of his chair. "One'd think you was a lady's maid!" he roared. "Tittle-tattling gossip, and never a care for a gentleman's amusements! I dare swear you never went near the cocking match?"

"You're right, sir. A bloody business," returned his nephew wearily. "I abhor blood."

"Sure, I think your veins run milk!" jeered the old man.

"So? What says our divine Will?"

*' . . . Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way . . . '*

"Tcha!" sputtered Sir Julian. "Hamlet was a fool, and mad into the bargain!"

"Indeed? You amaze me, sir. But as it chances I was speaking of Macbeth, who was neither a fool nor mad, but merely—hagdriven."

Disconcerted, Sir Julian helped himself to wine and pushed the decanter toward Ralph. "Another glass 'fore ye start for the ball, lad. What, no more? Well, well, 'tis wise to keep a cool head among all this gallimaufry. 'Tis a queer crowd gathers here, and ye can't be too careful."

"I'll heed your warning, uncle," laughed the youngest Carew. "But sure, after two years of foreign travel a man should be able to take care of himself. Are you coming, coz?"

"Where? To the Rooms? Heaven forbid! And as it happens I have—other engagements. The stars in their courses fight for me, Ralph. Fare ye well."

For a long time after the younger cousin had gone Sir Julian remained sunk in his chair, glowering at his heir, and thwarted affection embittered his next words.

"Gad!" said he below his breath. "That the inheritance should descend to such a booby!"

"You can break the entail, sir," suggested Valerius, apparently waking from a doze.

"Pho! You've sharp ears, young man!"

"I thank God," returned his nephew piously.

Sir Julian grunted, following the carved spirals of his chair with nervous fingers. "Come, come!" he quavered at length. "You're young, Val. Shake off this damnable sloth. I vow I half believe you pose! We Carews—gad, we have our faults, but they're of the hot-blooded sort. None of us has been the brainless ass you appear. By heaven, sir, I'd rather see you a rake than—than a flaccid nonentity!"

Sir Julian became unprintable. It was a full-blooded age, and he was never one to mince words.

A flush stole up his nephew's cheeks beneath their mask of powder, the muscles of his jaws drew tense.

"What, have I stirred you?" cried the baronet, and chuckled.

"No, faith," drawled Valerius, stretching. "I blush for your language, sir."

Sir Julian became almost apoplectic in his wrath; shook feeble hands in the air; called heaven to witness he'd break the entail; choked, gasped, and fell back in his chair clawing at his cravat.

Harris came in answer to a clamoring bell.

"See to Sir Julian," said Valerius. "He's—excited, Harris. I strongly disapprove of excitement. Is he often so?"

Harris went to the dresser and returned with a restorative, motioning the young man to be silent.

He drew back the curtains and threw up a window; and presently, under his ministrations Sir Julian opened bloodshot eyes, coughed, drained the glass, and scowled upon his kinsman.

"You came near finishing me with your nonsense," he muttered. "Go away! Harris, send him away. I'm too old to be badgered. What, sir! You're laughing at me. I swear you laugh at me. No Carew was ever a milksop. Get ye gone! Go to the devil so that you find your manhood, I care not! Harris, send for Robertson. I'll break the entail . . . demmit, Ralph—Ralph's the lad! He shall have—"

His head fell back and Valerius caught him round the shoulders. "Go fetch a doctor!" he said. "Get his bed warmed."

Old Harris shambled away, discovered the footmen at cards in the pantry, and sent one for the doctor: woke the drowsing housekeeper and bade her fill the warming-pan: and having given a dozen orders to the startled servants, climbed the stairs again, panting a little in his haste. He might have been out of the room some twenty minutes.

Sir Julian lay dead upon the floor beside his desk. There was no sign of Valerius Carew.

CHAPTER IV

THE DECOY

A CROWD of chairmen carrying sedans blocked the flagged court before the doors of the Assembly Rooms, jostling each other to the vast inconvenience of their passengers, who cursed or shrieked as became their sex. Running footmen elbowed a way through the crush for their masters; link boys hung about, awaiting engagements as escort when the ball should be over. Loungers gathered to watch the quality, for the Abbey clock had but just told six, and spring sunlight shamed the candles that flickered in the sconces of the ballroom.

White hat tucked beneath one arm, an ancient dandy leaned upon his cane; quizzing new-comers; greeting acquaintances; frowning majestically upon any who did not satisfy his fastidious taste.

Beaux minced in; bowed to the King of Bath and raised square glasses to scan the seats against the walls, eyes alert for an alluring glance from the beauties who swam to and fro, hoops swaying, fans accentuating trifles of gossip, tit-bits of scandal.

Boyishly eager, young Carew made his way through the throng. Women appraised his figure;

men discussed the fashion of his brocaded coat; shy girls, peering from the shelter of dowagers' wings, hoped he would notice them and beg the favor of a dance.

Dorothy Forrest caught his name and turned to look at him as he was presented to old Lady Kirkpatrick; and young Carew murmured inane replies to inquiries after relatives whom he seldom saw and was only too glad to forget, following the girl with eyes that glowed.

Gad, this was Bath! An English rose. Delicious memories of the dark-skinned beauties of his travels faded into mere pleasant recollection.

"Young man!" Lady Kirkpatrick's fan upon his wrist made him start. "Attend me, if you please. Your wits are wool-gathering. 'Tis dangerous sport in Bath. The unwary lamb goes off shorn!" Her puckered eyes beneath their bushy brows regarded him mischievously. "And how doth your great-aunt Sophia?"

"Faith, ma'm, I believe she's well," answered young Carew, aware to his finger-tips that the rose-pink girl was watching him from the shelter of her fan. "That is, I—I—gad, I recollect now, she died last year while I was in Venice. I'd not seen her for an age, ma'm. I'd forgot."

"And your cousin Valerius? He's not here to-night?"

"No, ma'm. I believe he has other engagements."

"Ha! A strange creature. Tell me, does he

frequent that woman Forrest's rooms? A baggage! What, han't ye heard of 'em? Yonder's the daughter, out hunting game for her mother's table. He, he! A pretty pair! Take an old woman's advice and keep clear of 'em, my dear."

Young Carew raised an astounded face. "What, ma'm? That beautiful child—a decoy?"

"O me! that these things should be!" jeered the dowager with a grimace. "I dare swear that in fancy you was leading her to the altar. Well, forewarned is forearmed. Keep out of her clutches. A vampire! Nash should forbid her the place, but he's the worst gambler o' the lot. Well, you don't want to listen to my croakings. D'ye dance? Let me present ye to my niece. Sarah! Sarah! Where the devil has the child got?"

Miss Sarah crept from a back seat and curtsied to the shining floor; and taking his due place in the order of dancers, young Carew did his duty, walking a couple of minuets before he escaped, his blue eyes roving in search of the rosy goddess so brutally maligned.

He found her presently in a smaller room, drinking tea beneath a glass chandelier, and for an instant he stood wondering if the picture she made was fortuitous or designed: she was as well placed as a statuette in some connoisseur's gallery. The soft light of the candles shone like an aureole in her glimmering hair; her eyes were shadowy under their veil of thick lashes; her rosy gown seemed

almost to radiate light. He could not believe that she was painted.

Half a dozen men surrounded her, ogling, flattering, thrall to her dainty loveliness, intrigued by her very imperturbation. Jealous of the new-comer's appearance they gathered closer, turning their backs upon Carew, attitudinizing, barricading Dorothy with lifted shoulders and gesticulating hands.

Carew smiled and awaited his opportunity, and as he watched there came a hair-raising crack, one of the supporting chains broke, and the great candelabrum tilted suddenly to one side and hung swaying, glass lusters clashing, a cloud of lighted candles falling like meteors.

The beaux beneath sprang backward, swearing, shouting, protecting themselves from the flying fire with upflung elbows and tricorn hats. But before Dorothy Forrest could rise Carew burst through the ring, lifted her bodily and bore her off.

It was all over before those in the ball-room realized the danger. Servants put out the guttering candles, cleared the room and locked the doors for fear the candelabrum should crash to the floor. Dancing continued; tea and cards claimed their devotees.

Beyond the locked anteroom Ralph Carew paused on the threshold; and unwilling to go out into the street with the girl in his arms, turned aside into a smaller room, laid her on a couch and threw open a window.

Presently she sat upright, smiling faintly, her hands busy with her disordered gown.

"O lud!" said she. "I'm all over grease!"

Carew looked blank. "You might have been burnt to death, madam," he began, piqued.

"True. I might. But for your heroic conduct, fair sir. You think I should be at you on my knees, groveling gratitude?" Adorably mischievous, she teased him, chin tilted, eyes dancing behind lowered lashes.

"Give thanks to heaven, madam."

"O lud, I do—I do! A burnt skin is such an abomination!" She stood up and looked him in the face; her voice dropped a full tone. "I thank you too, sir, with all my heart." She took a rose from her bodice and brushed it with her lips. "'Tis near crushed to death, but it smells all the sweeter for that. 'Tis yours, sir, if you will." She held it out to him with fingers that shook a little in spite of her sang-froid.

Young Carew took flower and hand and all, and bent his lips to them.

"La, sir, how you tremble!" laughed the girl. "There was no danger, was there?"

"'Tis in the touch of you," he told her; and had her in his arms before she guessed his intent.

Dorothy Forrest released herself with dignity.

"Keep your distance, sir. What though you saved my life? You have no right—"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Forrest," said Ralph, and bowed.

She pondered him, a finger at her lip. "You know my name? O la! half Bath knows my name. My reputation—save the mark!—is at the mercy of those old tabbies in the card-room. No doubt Lady Kirkpatrick solemnly warned you that I was a decoy? O lud, what a horrid tale for innocent ears! And you believed her, and thought me lawful prey—"

"Fore God, I did not!" cried Carew, shocked.

"Yet you'd have kissed me?"

"Gad, ma'm, I'm not a plaster saint! What man with you in his arms could—"

"Pho!" sneered Miss Forrest. "'Tis no more than propinquity!" And sank again upon the couch, her fan at her chin; her eyes, mischievously alluring, lifted to his.

Being no plaster saint, young Carew did as most men would have done: seated himself beside her, took possession of her hand, said whatever sweet nonsense came first to his tongue; declared that he must see her again next day; begged for a tryst, blue eyes alight and pulses hammering in his throat.

In spite of herself Dorothy was stirred, roused from her studied apathy by his impetuous wooing. At the bottom of her heart she felt she still cherished her old dream of a Fairy Prince who would come one day and carry her off from the loathsome life she was compelled to lead. Beneath his ardor the cloak of her indifference fell away like the split sheath of a flower; and timidly, hesitating on the

brink of passion, she blossomed under his very eyes.

Young Carew was aware only of her rising color, her catching breath; that the child's soul was opening like a rose he did not dream; he saw no more than a pretty girl, shielding her flushed cheeks with a gauze fan.

Presently into their dimly lit retreat came a servant seeking him: coughed, muttered an apology and backed away.

"What is it?" asked Carew, rising.

"Mr. Carew, sir? A man from Sir Julian Carew's to see you. Most urgent, sir, or I'd not have ventured—hem! Been looking for you all over the Rooms, sir, for the last half-hour."

"Bid him wait. I'll see him in a moment." Ralph turned to Dorothy Forrest. "Where do you live? Where can I meet you? Give me time and place and I'll—"

"No." She shook her head. "No, I'll be frank with you, Mr. Carew. I—I was sent here to-night to—to make certain that you'd come to the house to-morrow. My parents keep a—a faro table. It is all true—I—I am their decoy." Her voice broke, she held him off with resolute, trembling little hands. "No! You must never see me again—I—I'll not lure you to your ruin."

He laughed and took her. "Why, sweeting, I'm no pigeon to be plucked at will! I've seen something of life. I can be trusted alone!"

"No!" she insisted. "No. Believe me, sir, I—I like you too well to have a hand in your undoing. Forget that we ever met. I—I beseech you, let me go—the servant—"

Footsteps in the corridor sent them yards apart, flushed, a little dizzy.

The girl escaped through a farther door that led to the ladies' dressing-rooms; the man turned to face his uncle's major-domo, gray to the gills, breathless, perspiring.

"Why, Harris?" cried Carew. "What's amiss?"

"More than I like to tell, sir." The old man laid a shaking hand upon his arm. "After you left, Mr. Ralph, Sir Julian quarreled with Mr. Valerius. I heard high words, sir, an' I an't ashamed to say I listened at the door, bein' nervous for Sir Julian, sir, on account of his heart. The doctor warned us 'twould come if he got roused, an' roused he were, Mr. Ralph. Fair ragin'. The bell went fit to deave ye, an' I goes in. 'Send for Robertson,' he gasps. 'Demme,' says he, 'I'll break the entail, Ralph's the lad for me.' An' then he falls a-chokin' an' a-clawin' at the air. I give him a draught we had by us, an' went below-stairs to send one o' the men for the doctor. An' when I got back, sir, Sir Julian were lyin' dead an' Mr. Valerius was—gone."

"Good gad, Harris!" cried young Carew. "What d'ye mean? Valerius ran away and left him to die alone? The chicken-hearted cur!"

Harris wagged a mournful head. "I wish I could think so, Mr. Ralph. I wish to heaven I

could believe it. But facts is facts, an' 'tis a fact I heard 'em a-quarrelin'."

"Zoons, man! What are you hinting? Speak out!"

The servant dropped his voice to a hoarse whisper. 'I thinks, Mr. Ralph, I thinks Mr. Valerius—made quite sure Sir Julian couldn't break the entail afore he went an' took hisself off!'

"Murder?" whispered young Carew.

CHAPTER V

BETWEEN TWILIGHT AND DAWN

THE Globe Inn in King's Mead Square rang with shouts and laughter and all the jolly uproar of men gathered for a merrymaking. Piles of dirty plates encumbered the dresser, empty bottles lay heaped in corners of the room, and round the table sprawled a score of young bloods intent on making a night of it.

Flushed with wine; pulling at long clays; scribbling notes of incredible wagers, these patrons of sport hammered on the board with pewter pots and howled for a speech, until, urged from behind by eager partisans, a tall man rose in response.

Of all in that smoke-wreathed room, he alone was sober and master of his tongue: clad in a shabby, carefully brushed suit of brown cloth, a blue neckerchief knotted about his throat, he stood for a moment smiling absently, leaning on strong, brown hands spread upon the table.

"Speech!" bawled Sir Harry Kirkpatrick from the chair. "Speech! Silence for the gypsy! Hic! Silence, gen'lemen, I beg. Damn it, be quiet! Now, on wi' ye, Merodach."

They fell silent, staring owl-fashion at the lean

young face above them. The gypsy laughed and stood erect, tucking his thumbs into the armholes of his striped waistcoat."

"Ecod, gents and lordings," said he, white teeth flashing in a wide smile. "You know well enough I can't speechify! An' if I could, what should I say? 'Thank'ee, lords and gentles, for a meal I've scarce tasted, and wine I've not drunk.' Cock's blood, what it is to be in training!"

They howled with laughter as at some stupendous joke: swore it was a burning shame: vowed they'd make up for it once he had won the fight: promised him a carouse next night and lifted slopping tankards to his very good health.

"Gen'lemen, I'll be givin' ye a sentiment. The true British spirit, which, like purest gold, has no alloy!" Mr. Larry Cavanagh, swaying on his feet, was interrupted by a shout from the top of the table, where a red-faced little man expostulated, gesticulating violently.

"My very words, Mr. Cavanagh. My own expression! You're a demmed plagiarist—"

"I protest, sir n-not in the least, upon me soul!" declared Larry, flourishing a full glass. "Merely quoted, Captain Godfrey. Merely quoted. A man may quote, I presume, without offense?"

"Demme, sir! You gave it as your sentiment, and you'll find it in my pamphlet on the Champions, my peroration, sir! Demme, name your friend, Mr. Cavanagh, and my representative shall wait upon him in the morning. What's that? Nash be

demmed for an infernal little milksop! Can't a man fight if he—"

"We carry no swords in Bath, sir," interposed Cavanagh eagerly. "But faith, mine's rustin' in me lodgin', an' I—"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, ha' done!" Sir Harry Kirkpatrick thrust down the pugnacious little soldier and called for order. "As Chairman on this—f'licitous occasion, I must—positively I must insist on peace. Shall we in—hic—infringe the pre—pre-rogative of our champion Merodach, by—by cour-renancing a perry quarrel on the very eve of his big fight? Hic! Perish—I say—perish the thought! Larry, your hand. Captain, yours. Gen'lemen, a— a sublime sen'imient surras—hic! surras we have jus' heard expressed, belongs to—the posterity—"

Cheers drowned his voice. The Captain was understood to accept the explanation. Mr. Cavanagh pledged him handsomely and expressed a burning desire to purchase a dozen copies of the Captain's immortal work.

Through the genial hubbub that filled the room broke the name of Valerius Carew.

"Gad, it's a queer fish!" said one.

"His young coz seemed anxious to behold him! First person I've e'er met who wasn't flying in t'other direction. A bore? Gad save me, Revell, Carew'd bore the Sphinx! He han't a word for a friend nor a blow for an enemy nor—stap me! nor an eye for a wench!"

"And his cousin wanted to meet him, eh?"

"Yes. Told me he'd never set eyes on Val. It seemed deuced odd."

"Oh, Raymond Carew wed a nigger—well then, a foreigner, and old Sir Antony refused to meet her. So they lived abroad. Valerius han't been in England long and the youngker's but just back from Germany—"

"Paris! Seen his clothes? Oh, he posted hell-for-leather from town to kiss dear nunkie's hands and wish him long life."

"Pshaw! He's eighty!"

"Just. The lad knows which side his bread's buttered."

"But Valerius inherits, he's—"

"An' do ye say so?" Mr. Cavanagh cocked an eyebrow. "Do ye say so, indeed? Faith, time'll show."

"Where's young Carew to-night? An't he interested in sport? Old Carew'd stake the last tooth in his head on Brooke."

Sir Harry laughed. "Old Carew's not seen our Merodach. Brooke's antiquated."

"Broughton coached him, didn't he?"

"Merodach's pupil of Broughton's, too. Oh, 'tis a sweet match! Merodach, here's luck, an' damn you if you're beat! I've laid my last crown on you!"

"'Tis a cracked one, Merodach, cracked in the ring! Take no heed of him, man!" shouted Cavanagh. "We'll all be ruined entirely if ye fail. What, ye're not leavin' us?"

" 'Tis ten, gentlemen, and I'm for bed," returned the gypsy, rising.

"Who's it will be takin' ye home? An escort ho!"

" 'Tis his trainer's business."

"Gentlemen, I train myself, and I need no protection, thanking you kindly." A mischievous light flickered in Merodach's eyes for an instant as he surveyed his patrons, who appeared more in need of escort than capable of giving it. "Till to-morrow, sirs, and thank'ee for your entertainment!"

Under cover of a shouted chorus he made his escape and set out for his lodging, striding bare-headed through the narrow streets; breathing deep to clear his lungs of smoke; lifting dark eyes to the moon that shone above the clustered house-tops; whistling below his breath.

The coming fight caused him no uneasiness. He had met and vanquished more formidable opponents than Brooke: he had no misgivings, although he knew that the fortunes of a dozen patrons depended upon his victory.

Brooke's adherents had no misgivings either; their plans were well laid.

As the gypsy swung into an alley among the huddle of markets north of Orange Grove, a lame beggar whined for alms. Merodach stopped, thrusting both hands into his breeches' pockets to search for a coin, and something abominably heavy hit him on the back of the head. He fell like a log. The lame beggar sprang upon him, trailing a length

of rope, and presently, bound wrist and ankle, and still unconscious, Merodach was borne away by four men.

Avoiding the watch they chose by-ways and at length reached the outskirts of the town. The London road lay empty in the moonlight, patched with black shadows, still wet from a recent shower. A black and white cat picked her way between the starry puddles and, gaining an area railing, peered down. Four men were carrying something cumbersome into the empty house.

Half an hour passed before they reappeared with a bundle of clothing; a brown suit, a blue neckerchief, stout shoes, all tied together with a pair of gray worsted stockings.

"Not a hitch," said one. "Demme, 'twas easy as kiss my hand. He's safe out o' the way."

"What're ye going to do wi' the clobber?"

"Pitch it in the river, o' course."

"What d'ye stand to win, Giles?"

"Ecod, a tidy lump!" The rogue chuckled and jingled loose coppers in his pocket. "There'll be no fight. 'Twas play or pay, and Sir Humphrey Middleton'll make it worth our while, I'll take my oath. Sst! what's this?"

From the dark house of Sir George Forrest a cloaked figure emerged, hood clutched about its face, one shoulder dragged down by the weight of a valise. The woman was off up the London road with never a glance behind, and as the clack of high

heels faded, Giles caught at a comrade's coat skirts.

"Let her go," he urged. "'Tis an assignation, for sure. There'll be a man somewhere waiting an' we don't want to be seen about here. Off to bed wi' ye, cullies."

Lady Forrest stopped the play at an extraordinary hour that night. By half after ten the house was empty. Her guests wondered, grumbled, protested, swore. She laughingly declared that they might stay until three o'clock next evening, but to-night she would be private.

There was no gainsaying that.

The rooms once empty, she extinguished the lights and carried her winnings upstairs to her chamber. Janet was asleep before the fire and roused, smothering a yawn as her mistress came in.

"You may unpin me, child," said Lavinia wearily. "And then get to bed."

"An't you well, my lady?" Janet glanced at the clock. "'Tis but half after ten."

"I'm tired to death," sighed Lavinia. "Give me my wrapper and the salts. No, I need nothing else. You may go."

Janet went as far as the turn of the stair, blew out her candle and waited. As was to be expected, Lady Forrest threw open her door five minutes later, glanced round, and retired again. The abigail heard the key turn. Leaving her shoes upon the upper landing she endeavored to see what was afoot, but

the key blocked her view and she returned to sit huddled upon the attic chair, drowsing, yawning, wondering what her mistress could be at.

The slam of the front door awoke her and craning over the rail she listened for Dorothy's step in the hall. It did not come. She was mistaken. Some one had gone out.

Muttering to herself, Janet lit her candle, pulled on her slippers, and ran downstairs to find Lady Forrest's door wide and the room in darkness.

"Lawks!" ejaculated Janet, and broke into a flood of execration. "Gone? Oh, the viper! And what o' my wages, three months due and nothing left—" She plunged into the clothes closet; rummaged through tumbled drawers; flung aside the bed curtains to examine the pillows; sobbing in impotent rage as she shook out soiled kerchiefs and upset half-empty band-boxes. "Rot her! Never a groat, an' Sir George, an' Mr. Charles off to France, though they did think to hoodwink me wi' their talk o' London, I'm no fool—and a bumbailey in the pantry—an' now my lady off, eloping for what I can tell. Oh, the beldam! Not so much as a jeweled button!" She rushed to the dressing-table. The silver tops were missing from the essence pots; the buckles had been torn from two pairs of shoes; there was not a trinket of any kind.

Her eyes fell on a letter. She caught it up, and a jingle of money came from the folded paper. The woman hesitated, fingering the seal, remembering that the theft of more than forty shillings committed

in a house was a crime punishable by death. Yet she had not received her wages. She set her teeth and ripped the letter open, counting the gold eagerly. Ten guineas. It would serve. She rolled it in a wide silk ribbon and pinned it carefully in an under-pocket: then she realized that in her haste she had so torn the letter that it could not be refolded. Sweeping aside a litter of brushes and rouge pots she spread it flat upon the table, poring over it, her lips pinched between fingers and thumb.

"MY DEAR DOLL," wrote Lady Forrest, "You are aware that your father has been called away on business. I have of a sudden found it necessary to go too. Do not be Alarmed. Janet will look after you. I enclose ten guineas as you may need some Money. No doubt more will be forthcoming shortly but I beg you to be Careful. It will be well if you leave Bath within the week and post to your cousin's at Winterbourne Chase. Wait there until I send for you. All this is Monstrous upsetting but it could not be Avoided. I have Perfect Confidence in your Ability to take care of yourself, but have nought to do with Mrs. Bradley. The woman has a most unpleasant Reputation.

"Your affect. mother,

"LAVINIA FORREST."

Manifestly, it was impossible to give that letter to Miss Dorothy lacking the ten gold pieces. Janet glanced at the clock, tore the paper across and across

and held the scraps in the flame of a candle. As the ashes fell sidelong to the carpet she set her foot upon them, rubbing them to powder. Then unreasoning, panic terror laid hold upon her.

The house was empty save for the bailiff asleep upon two chairs in the butler's pantry, but at any moment Miss Dorothy might return. Greed and dread of the law fought in Janet's mind, but it was not her intention to leave empty handed. She snatched a silk petticoat and a brocaded gown, gloves, fans, and a lace scarf, rolled them into two bundles and finding a long leathern strap among the trunks in a garret, slung her booty over her shoulders. Her wide cloak covered the bundles well enough to pass unnoticed in the night.

Moving stealthily she crept downstairs and out by the garden door and the shadows swallowed her up.

Thus it came about that Dorothy Forrest, still flushed with the demure gayety of country dances, was put into her chair by three adorers and carried home to a deserted house.

That Ralph Carew did not reappear to dance with her troubled her not at all. She understood that his uncle's servant had summoned him away. If she knew anything of men he would not rest content until he had contrived a meeting. It was delightfully romantic, to be sure; but her mother would storm at her when she saw those grease spots upon her gown, a new one, hardly worn. She hoped that

Lady Forrest would be too tired to notice them; she might slip unobserved to bed, and try what a hot iron and flannel would do in the morning.

Emerging from her chair she dismissed the men with the assurance born of long habit, and set her key in the door. It was a damning fact in the eyes of Bath, that latch-key, that trapesing to and fro at all hours, without so much as a maid in attendance. Dorothy thought nothing of it.

The door swung back upon a dark hall: fortune favored her: doubtless her mother's guests had left earlier than was ordinary, and she had retired. It was monstrous lucky.

The girl groped her way to the dining room, raked the dying fire, and lit a taper at the embers. Candle-light revealed scattered plates and glasses, despoiled dishes upon the dresser, chairs set all ways as though invisible occupants still gossiped. Dorothy hesitated. It was odd that Janet had not cleared away.

She poured wine, chose a cake and stood eating, still a little excited over her adventure; pondering young Carew's impetuous wooing; smiling; flushing; acknowledging that he was a presentable fellow; exultant in that Lady Kirkpatrick's malicious tongue had had no effect upon his estimation of her.

Nibbling at a candied pear Dorothy took her candle and went above-stairs, glancing into the deserted gaming rooms. The air smelt stale and she propped the doors open.

On the next landing she paused outside her mother's room, arrested by a white silk stocking

that trailed across the threshold. The door stood slightly ajar and she pushed it wide and entered, aghast at the scene of confusion that met her eyes. Drawers had been pulled out of their chests and turned upside down upon the floor. Heaps of rumpled underclothing lay in corners; a hat was in the grate and a bottle of essence was spilt over the dressing-table, which reeked of bergamot.

"Mother!" cried the girl, and snatched at the curtains of the bed, not knowing what she might find. The pillows were flung against the foot; the bed had not been used, for Lavinia's night-rail was folded under the covers. Amazed, frightened, Dorothy lit more candles and searched the room, half expecting to discover a letter, a message of some sort.

There was nothing.

She went into her father's chamber and found it empty but more or less in order. His valise and the saddle-bags were gone from the cupboard in the wall; the closet where his man slept was empty too, but she knew that Sir George had taken his valet and ridden to London on urgent business a week ago.

Sobbing under her breath, the girl ran about the desolate house, a candle flaring in one hand, her skirts caught up in the other; calling in frightened whispers; almost distraught with half-formed misgivings; forgetting all her mother's cruelty and spite in her anxiety as to her fate.

At length, dishevelled, tear-stained, she gave up the search, lingering at the stair-head, remembering that she had not been through the kitchens. The thought of the dark basement stayed her: she would wait until the morning.

Trembling, she climbed to the top of the house, peered into one attic half filled with trunks and lumber, and hastily retreated to her own room, a garret with sloping roof and great cupboards built into the walls. A door at one side led to the smaller room where Janet slept, and Dorothy went in once more to make quite certain that the woman was not there. She opened the door of a closet, pushed at the hanging clothes; knelt down to peer beneath the bed. Naturally the buxom Janet was in none of these places, but somehow it comforted her to look.

Presently, tired out with apprehension and dismay, Dorothy undressed and crept to bed, falling into an uneasy slumber, her tear-wet cheek pressed into the pillows.

In the small hours of the morning Bartholomew Griggs fell off his two chairs and awoke, cursing. A curious taste in his mouth suggested that his supper ale had been drugged, and he remembered that the woman had urged him to help himself generously. Women were the devil.

He got to his feet and rubbed his cramped legs, stamping about the pantry to restore circulation; and then, resolved to spend the rest of the night in

a more comfortable way, he went upstairs in search of cushions and a settee, and something to wash that vile taste from his tongue.

The dining-room provided wine and Griggs got rid of the taste without difficulty, ate a second supper and emptied three bottles of canary. Then he looked about him with the hazy notion that a bed would be convenient.

Rolling out to the hall his hands fell on the banister and he climbed slowly, clinging to the rail, aware that doors gaped upon the landings but unwilling to let go his hold in order to explore.

"Mushn' disturb th' quality," he mumbled. "Atticsh besh f'r likes o' me." And ventured higher, stumbling in the dawning light that showed gray through the tall windows.

As her door swung inward beneath his weight Dorothy awoke and sat upright, dazed, cold with sudden fear. The man lurched forward, and even as she scrambled to the floor he collapsed upon her bed and immediately slept.

Panic-stricken, Dorothy darted into Janet's room, pushed to the door and dragged a table against it; and creeping into the wall-cupboard sank down upon a fallen cloak and sat shivering in her thin night-dress.

The unreality of a dream hedged her round. The whole evening seemed to have been one long series of disasters, and even in the sanctuary of Janet's clothes-closet there was no peace, for a

rat was scrabbling intermittently in the wainscot.

Dorothy abhorred rats. She raised her hand and smacked the wall with the flat of her palm, and was startled almost out of her senses to hear an answering blow.

CHAPTER VI

THE PRIZE FIGHTER

PETRIFIED with sudden fright Dorothy sat rigid, palpitating, crouched against the wall, choking back the scream that rose in her throat. Hordes of rats were preferable to the drunken creature asleep upon her bed.

A pulsating silence followed that one terrible knock, but after a while she became aware that something moved in the wall at her ear. There came a muffled groan, a subdued scuffling, then an unmistakable blow, thudding upon bare boards. To Dorothy's certain knowledge the house next door had been empty for over a year. She held her breath to listen.

The thought of ghosts never entered her mind. There was something human and alive, shut into a cupboard similar to that in which she crouched. A big dog, perhaps. Dorothy had spent the greater part of her childhood in the country and was perfectly accustomed to big dogs, the bigger the better. If she could get it out a big dog would be a very comforting companion. Heartened at the thought she tapped again, and again came an answering thump, an inarticulate appeal for help, curiously close to her ear.

She felt along the papered walls of the closet and her fingers slid into a crack, a long groove running downward to the floor. Panting with eagerness and amazement, tremulous with excitement, she wrenched a steel buckle from one of Janet's shoes and tore at the paper.

There was a door.

A heavy body turned over in the farther cupboard and uncouth sounds suggested that some one was trying to speak through a gag.

"Oh, what is it?" cried Dorothy. "Who's there? Can you hear me? Push at the wall!"

A man's knees and feet forced back the little door and Dorothy peered through, groping in pitch darkness. As the prisoner struggled to a sitting posture and thrust forward his head her fingers encountered thick, crisp hair, and the knotted ends of a kerchief. The gag was out almost before she knew how she had done it.

"Thanks," said a deep voice. "Have you a knife?"

"I—I can fetch a scissors," gasped the girl. "What—?"

"I'll tell you more when I've had a drink."

Scrambling backward into Janet's room, Dorothy presently found a jug of water and a pair of stout scissors. She crept again into the cupboard and held the jug while the man drank thirstily.

"Phew!" said he. "A foul cotton gag! They might ha' given me clean linen, but 'tis too much to hope from sandbaggers."

His voice puzzled Dorothy: it seemed familiar, and yet unlike any other that she had ever heard. She faltered something about scissors.

"If you'll get a light I'll roll over and you can reach my wrists," he said.

Retiring again to Janet's room Dorothy found flint and steel, but as the candle flared up beneath the glowing sulphur match, she caught sight of herself in the cracked mirror, and realized that she was clad only in her night-dress. She snatched the first garment that came to hand, knotted a kerchief about her shoulders, and carrying the light went back to the cupboard.

The man looked up to find a slender girl in the gray cotton dress of a waiting-maid, kneeling at the opening to his prison; her neck half hidden by a white muslin, her slim fingers glowing rosily against the candle flame. The girl looked down upon a swarthy, half-naked fellow bound hand and foot with thin, strong cords. He wriggled over and lay upon his face while she cut through his bonds, and when at length his wrists were free he bade her, rather roughly, to leave him.

She pulled a blanket from the bed and tossed it into the closet, and then retiring to the dressing-table, busied herself with her tumbled hair. Presently out into the garret strode a savage figure, black hair tossing over black eyes, sinewy arms and legs bare: the blanket with a hole cut in the middle covered him from shoulder to knee, and was girded over his narrow hips with a length of rope.

Yet in spite of his barbaric aspect Dorothy found nothing to fear.

"I've spoilt your blanket," said he, smiling down at her. "Will your mistress whip you?"

Not knowing quite how to correct his very natural mistake, Dorothy shook her head.

"Is the household asleep, child? Can you get me food and drink? I've been mewed in that hole for hours." He dropped upon the bed and began to rub his chafed ankles.

Dorothy moved to lift away the table from the door. He looked up, amazed.

"What, d'you barricade yourself at night? Good gad! Here—let me—" He would have opened the door for her but that she stayed him, a finger at her lips.

"There's a man asleep in there—I'm afraid—I don't know—I don't wish him to waken—" A sob caught her voice. "Will you—shall we tiptoe through and down the stair? There's food and wine—I'll tell you—I'll explain—O lud, sir, come softly—I'm nigh dead of terror!"

He nodded reassuringly, his eyes questing over her poor gown, her shining hair, her piteously trembling hands.

A stertorous snore reached them as she pulled open the door, and shielding the light the gypsy halted for an instant beside the bed, gazing curiously down at the unlovely occupant.

"Phew!" said he below his breath. "Barty Griggs, on my soul!"

"You know him?" whispered Dorothy.

Merodach nodded again.

They crept out, barefoot, and closing the door cautiously, Dorothy led the way to the dining room, where she cleared a space on the disordered table and chose wine and food.

"To our better acquaintance!" said the gypsy, smiling above his glass. "Come, child, you must drink. You're trembling with cold and I dare swear you're bursting with curiosity."

She swept the hair out of her eyes with a dazed little gesture and drank obediently. "To our—better acquaintance," said she.

He caught the glass as it slid out of her nerveless fingers. "Is this cold or terror? What has frightened you so? Was it Barty? Lud, when he's in liquor he's harmless as a fish!"

"I was asleep when he blundered into my room. Who is he? Why is—"

"I think 'tis probable he's here on business," ventured Merodach. "Must I explain? Child, he's a bailiff."

For a moment Dorothy gave no sign that she understood. Then she sank into a chair and sat clutching the table-cloth, staring perplexedly at the man before her. "A—a bailiff?" echoed she. "W—what—?"

"In possession. Is your master in debt?"

"My—my father was called away to London a week since, and to-night I came from the Rooms to find my mother gone and the house empty—"

"But for Barty Griggs?"

"He must have been below-stairs," said she, considering. "I daren't search the basement. There are black beetles."

He nodded solemnly, and cutting up part of a cold chicken set it before her. "Eat, or you'll be ill," he said, and began his own meal with a good appetite.

After a while: "You drink nothing," said Dorothy. "An't the wine to your taste?"

"I'm in training," he explained. "One glass, to drive out the chill of that garret, but no more. To-morrow I'm to meet Brooke. That's why I was sandbagged and stripped and shut up out o' the way. They're afraid of me. They thought even if I got free I'd not go to the fight half-naked." He laughed and showed her the muscles of his arms with a boyish exultation that was engaging. "Feel! I'm fit as a fiddle, and Brooke—well Brooke's relying on his reputation. What, don't you understand, child? I'm a prize fighter. Oh, 'tis a great life, believe me!"

"You fight—for money?" she hazarded.

"Exactly."

Sitting there clad in his girt blanket he made a picturesque, strenuous figure, and unconsciously Dorothy compared him with the men she knew, to their detriment. He seemed serenely unaware of her peering eyes, perfectly indifferent as to the effect of his words upon her, unconscious of anything extraordinary in the situation.

"The fire's not out," said he, stretching. "I'll mend it and we can sit and talk in comfort until morning." Without asking permission he busied himself about the hearth, raking out the dead ash, blowing red embers to a blaze, piling on dry wood that was stacked ready to hand until when the fire was roaring up the chimney he threw a couple of cushions upon the floor and beckoned the girl nearer.

"Come toast your toes," he invited, "and tell me your side o' the story. You know mine."

"I don't know your name," began Dorothy.

He laughed. "Who does? Men call me Mero-dach, and it serves as well as another. Merodach, the god of battle, the god of the morning light and the spring sun. Oh, 'tis a name takes some living up to, I assure you!" He sat down cross-legged and patted the other cushion with the air of a host at a wayside encampment, offering hospitality to a fellow traveler. In the dancing fire-light he looked a very faun; an artless, friendly denizen of open spaces, content for the moment to rest beside a hearth, but ready to follow the wind's will the instant he heard the call.

The girl caught something of his friendliness and dropped beside him, stretching her fingers to the blaze; but in spite of his invitation she remained silent.

At length: "This, if I mistake not, is Sir George Forrest's house?" he began.

"Yes." For an instant she turned her head and looked him in the eyes. "If you know so much, doubtless you know more. 'Tis common knowledge that my parents keep a faro table."

"Your parents!"

"I am Dorothy Forrest. The town will tell you that I am a decoy," she checked his half-uttered exclamation with a swift hand. "'Tis true. I go—as old Lady Kirkpatrick says at every opportunity—I go a-hunting game for my mother's table. 'Tis her one witty speech. She delivered it with vast gravity to-night, but I'm persuaded that it made no impression—" she broke off, glanced at him, decided that 'twas no secret, and added—"upon Mr. Ralph Carew."

Merodach lifted his head and regarded her thoughtfully.

"You met—Mr. Ralph Carew?"

"At the ball," she admitted.

"A new-comer?"

"But just returned from two years' travel."

"And he's to come here to-morrow—to-night rather, to adventure his fortune?"

"No," said Dorothy softly. "I forbade him."

Merodach laughed. "O child! Han't ye learned 'tis the surest way to bring a man? Gad, you knew it!"

"I was in earnest," cried the girl. "I forbade him the house. He'll not come. Oh, shame! You believe what they say of me; he did not!"

"I think of you as one more sinned against than sinning," he began, and bit his lip with a covert glance at her.

The words conveyed nothing to Dorothy, who read nothing worth remembering and remembered nothing that she read.

The gypsy clasped his hands about his knees and gazed at the fire, relieved, albeit a little disappointed in her. "So your parents have left you in charge?" he suggested.

"Faith, they've left me," answered the girl with a little catch in her breath. "I searched everywhere for a message, a letter—but there was nothing."

"Servants?"

"My father's man rode with him a week ago. My mother's woman—sure, she'd take her—"

"She's gone?"

Dorothy nodded, groping amid a chaos of half-formed thoughts.

"But a house this size needs other servants?"

"They come in by the hour," she explained. "There's no room for them to sleep. The pastry-cook sends men to help with the supper. D'you think they could have ransacked the place? 'Tis so upset—Janet would never have left it so. O lud, I don't know what to think!"

"Will you let me search the house?" said Mero-dach.

"If you would. I was afraid to venture in the kitchens."

He stood up, knotted the rope more tightly about his waist, stretched like a lithe animal, and professed himself ready.

"D'you want a weapon?" faltered Dorothy. "A poker—"

He laughed and held out clenched fists. "I go armed. Is it dark below-stairs? Will you carry a light?"

The pale beauty of a moonstone surrounded them as they came out into the hall: in the narrow windows the east was already faintly flushed: across the dew-gray meadows the placid Avon shone like silver, and a bird began chirking in the budding cherry orchards below the garden.

Together they searched the hall, the morning room: descended to the basement to peer into coal-cellar and pantry: explored the deserted, echoing kitchens, but found no clue to the mystery.

Merodach refused to go out into the area. "I must lie close till evening," said he. "The match is at six. If you can find me clothing I'll burst upon 'em at the eleventh hour, Adrastia turned male!" He laughed, meeting her blank stare. "'Twas play or pay, and a dozen fortunes lie in my hands. Brooke's adherents look to win without a fight. I'll be there to disappoint 'em!"

In Sir George's room Dorothy opened the closet, hesitated, a finger at her lip, and then finding his eyes upon her smiled and stood back.

"Sure, you'd best choose for yourself. My

father's clothes will be a thought small for you, but there's no other—"

"His man?" suggested Merodach, glancing disparagingly at the array of silks and satins which Sir George had perforce left behind him in his flight.

"O lud! Charles is a grasshopper beside you!" laughed Dorothy. "See, here's a green riding coat would do, and there's linen in this chest." She left him and went into her mother's room where she folded petticoats away, hung gowns in the cupboard and restored the place to some degree of order. Finally, having smoothed the bed and opened the windows, she turned to go and came face to face with Bartholomew Griggs, who leered at her and straightway lifted up his voice in song.

*"As I was a-walkin' one mornin' in May,
To view the green fields and the meadows so gay,
I heard a fair damsel, so sweet did she sing,
"Oh I will be married on a Tuesday mor-ning!"
Ta rum ti de dum ti de—"*

He took a ponderous dancing step and winked with great cordiality.

"I step-ped up to her an' thus did I say—"

Come, says I, han't ye got a kiss for old Barty?" A dirty hand grabbed at her.

"Keep your distance, fellow," said Dorothy, and

made to pass him: but the glance that would have annihilated Mr. Ralph Carew had no effect whatsoever upon the bailiff. He gathered her to him and pursed thick lips.

"Merodach!" screamed Dorothy.

In after life Bartholomew Griggs was wont to boast that he had received Merodach's left under the ear, and lived to tell the tale. "Gosh!" he'd say, gazing round upon the circle of admirers. "Caught me here, see? Lifted me clean off me feet. Sent me spinning into a corner, an' there I lay thinkin' as how the roof had fallen in. Zoons, boys! Merodach's left, an' he but six an' twenty!"

Merodach stood above him, buttoning a flowered waistcoat. "What, man!" said he, grinning. "Never look so scared. I might ha' killed ye."

"Oons!" gasped Bartholomew, rubbing his jowl. "Merodach, as I'm a sinner!" He remained gaping at the gypsy until pride overcame the natural hostility a man feels toward one who has knocked him flying. Merodach thrust forth a hand and pulled him to his feet, and the bailiff pumped his arm up and down, stuttering with elation.

"Sir, I'm proud to shake ye by the hand. Gad, I hope I carry a bruise! 'Twill be summat to boast on to my grandchildren. Sir, your very obleeged 'umble servant. Eh, I saw ye fight in Broughton's behind the Oxford Road, an' a pretty sight ye made!" He leered across at Dorothy. "Poachin', was I? Well, sir, 'twas unbeknownst, an' I asks pardon—"

Merodach cut him short. "'Tis Miss Forrest, who's saved my life and my reputation. I'll tell you more as we get breakfast, the house is empty but for ourselves. Up, man, and forage!" With a reassuring nod to Dorothy he pushed the bailiff before him. The girl heard them descend to the kitchens, and leaning over the banister caught sounds of chopping wood and the rattle of thick crockery.

Heartsick, desolate, she went back to her room and dressed in a peacock-blue gown which she particularly detested: rolled up her hair with none of the fastidious pains she generally took, and glancing at herself in the mirror, was curiously comforted to find that she looked a perfect fright. She had forbidden Ralph Carew to come. Why should she dress for a gypsy prize-fighter and a horrible bailiff? Would they expect her to eat with them?

She resolved not to breakfast, and met Merodach carrying a loaded tray at the head of the first stair.

"Where'll you have it?" said he cheerily.

"Thank you. I need nothing."

He glanced from her piled golden hair to the severe blue gown. "Faith, you look a madonna, but I'll swear you're flesh and blood. Come and eat, or I lose my labor."

Hot coffee, bread, butter, a boiled egg, honey—he set them all out upon the table and offered his wrist to lead her to a chair. Her fingers rested for an instant upon warm, smooth skin; she found her-

self seated with a steaming cup at her side, before she realized exactly what had happened.

Merodach pushed the salt cellar within reach and cut the top off her egg. She looked up, amazed at his attention.

"Griggs'll not trouble you," he told her coolly. "I've to offer his apologies. 'Tis as I expected. He's here in possession, and—Lady Forrest has evidently made a bolt of it. Her woman drugged his supper ale."

"It's strange she left no message," faltered Dorothy, instinctively motioning him to the chair beside her. With Sir George's clothes he seemed to have put on something of the manners of a gentleman.

"There's a smear of ash trodden into the carpet below my lady's table. I believe she did write and left you money, and her woman took it and burned the letter."

"'Tis possible. But how—?"

"Two bits escaped the candle," he added, and laid them before her; diagonal strips of singed paper, each showing part of two lines in Lavinia's narrow writing. ". . . the week . . . wait there . . ." and "confidence in . . . Mrs. Bradley . . ." was decipherable.

"Mrs. Bradley?" murmured Dorothy. "How odd!"

"A—friend of yours?" hazarded Merodach, watching her.

"Lud, no! I've seen her at the Rooms. I dislike her extremely."

"Has no one told you her—profession?"

"Oh, yes. She used to keep a finishing school for the daughters of gentlemen. Even now one or two old pupils live with her. My mother evidently intends me to wait there until she can send." Miss Forrest tried to fit the two scraps of paper together, failed, and shrugged. "I'd liefer go into a nunnery, but beggars can't be choosers and I've no means of hiring a post-chaise."

"I can lend you—" he burst out, and stopped.

"If you win your fight?" said she. "Thank you, but I want no blood-money."

For an instant their eyes met, coldly blue challenging keen, bright brown. Miss Forrest was the first to look away.

"You—dislike prize fighting?" he said; and somehow she was aware that he would not utter the words that had leaped to his tongue.

"O God!" cried the girl, and choked upon a sob. "I loathe all fighting. My whole life is full of nothing else. My parents wrangle over everything and nothing, and I with them. We fight for money night after night with cards and dice and wine for weapons. I, I fight my pride, my modesty, my self-respect, and folk think me brazen—O lud, one has to wear armor!" She bit a trembling lip and smiled at him wanly. "Now you think I rant. Oh yes, you do." She shrugged and rose; he was on his feet instantly. "Well, one must live. I may

come to the stage yet. I think I could play Ophelia, but Juliet—no.”

“Why not?” he asked absently, unaware that he was staring.

“I know too much of men ever to fall in love with one of them, even in make-believe.”

“You’ve gained that knowledge from the beaux you meet here and at the Rooms!” he cried. “Gad, my girl, be fair! You know but one type of man, and there are scores of others!”

“True,” said Miss Forrest coldly. “Until last night I had spoke with none but gentlemen.”

He found himself staring at the empty doorway, shook back his hair, grinned good-humoredly, and loading the tray carried it below.

“Miss hath the megrims,” said he as the bailiff rose and jerked crumbs from the creases in his clothing. “Wash up, Barty, while I get something to eat.”

“What! I thought ye broke fast above-stairs?” began Griggs.

“I was not invited,” returned Merodach, and pouring the cold coffee into a skillet, set it among the embers to heat.

CHAPTER VII

LARRY CAVANAGH

AFTER another fruitless search Dorothy faced the unpleasant fact that she was penniless, but for the few shillings in her jewel box. Lady Forrest had taken all her personal valuables; Janet had appropriated as much as she could carry. Although Dorothy had never possessed regular pin money she had never been without a guinea or two to spend, and Sir George was easy to wheedle if she wanted new clothes. Now she realized that she might lack the absolute necessities of life, and the prospect dismayed her.

Subdued, a little dazed, the girl wandered disconsolately about the house, aware that the bailiff's eyes followed her from the shelter of the door jambs, but reassured by Merodach's influence over the man.

"I has to see as ye takes nought away," he explained, meeting her on the landing as she came from her mother's room.

"There's nothing of value that I could carry," returned Dorothy wearily. She made to pass him but he remained planted in her path, blinking up at her with small, red-rimmed gray eyes.

"I'm a soft-hearted customer, I am," said Bartholomew, with what he fondly imagined to be an

ingratiating smile. "I can't abide to see beauty in distress. A morsel of advice now, missie? Would it be took imperent, or would it be accepted of in the spirit as offered?"

Heartsick for a friend, Dorothy hesitated, and he caught at her irresolution.

"If ye'd consent to a bit of palaver wi' me an' young Merodach, conclusions might be come to, d'ye see? A plan's what ye lack. Summat to work from. Trouble's never such a bogey if looked at fair an' square, an' speakin' strickly for meself, o' course, it's the things I can't see I'm scart on."

"Thank you. You may tell Merodach I'll speak with him," said Miss Forrest, and descended to the dining-room divided between laughter and tears. The life she led, cut off from the companionship of girls of her own age, had tended to make her morbidly self-centered: she saw herself from outside, and was at the same time both actor and spectator of the scenes wherein she played a part. It was characteristic that now, with tears thick upon her lashes, she went over to the mirror above the hearth to note the effect. Her eyes were unbecomingly red. She swallowed hard, and found a seat back to the light.

The two men discovered her at the head of the table, a pathetic little figure enthroned in a tall arm-chair, her fingers drumming nervously upon the polished board before her.

"Barty tells me that you need advice," began the gypsy, dropping into a chair at her right.

She nodded and bit her trembling lower lip. "I need more than advice. I've seven shillings, and the clothes I wear. I—I suppose I've no real right even to those."

"No more ye han't, missie," said Griggs heartily. "Bein' as you might say of the female persuasion."

"But sure, you've friends in Bath?" suggested Merodach.

Dorothy shook her head. "Not now. Miss Abrams is gone back to Scotland with her aunt. She was the only woman with whom I was—intimate—"

"Yet you must have met scores of people who—"

"Scores. But there's not one I can call friend, unless—"

"Barrin' we, missie. Me an' Merodach!" insisted Griggs.

"Thank you," returned the girl, and smiled, April-fashion.

The trio sat and stared at one another in silence.

"How long shall I be allowed to stay here?" asked Dorothy at length.

The bailiff puckered his mouth. "Well, there's to be a sale, d'ye see? In less'n a week there won't be a stick in the place, 's far as I know. But, speakin, strickly between friends, ye could stay here another couple o' nights, mebbe, an' then ye'd be well advised to flit, takin' wi' ye a small an' inconspickus valise packed wi' strickly personal—"

"Two nights?" pondered Dorothy. "I might run the tables for two nights. That should bring me in

enough to hire a chaise and post to Winterbourne—to my cousin's home in Sussex," she added in answer to Merodach's inquiring eyes.

"Thank you, friends. I'll go out and order the supper—" She broke off, confused, remembering that she could pay for nothing.

"Well, your guests must be content with wine and cakes," suggested Merodach. "You've flour and eggs in the house? There was enough left of last night's fare to make a dozen pies and puddings."

"What, can you cook as well as fight?" asked Dorothy, staring.

"Let me show you!" cried Merodach.

They spent three hours in the kitchen among a litter of patty-pans and the collected débris of yesterday's meals. Merodach in shirt sleeves, an apron protecting Sir George's green cloth breeches: Dorothy flushed and merry, her rosy elbows powdered with flour: Bartholomew red-faced, perspiring from the oven, sucking his fingers surreptitiously. The place rang with the clatter of crockery and the beat of wooden spoons in batter. Merodach whistled above the pastry-board: Dorothy chattered as she cut up candied fruits, excited, almost hysterical, rapt out of her habitual apathy by this sudden change in her fortunes.

Versed as she was in the ephemeral intrigues of Bath, it was a new and wonderful experience to look into a man's eyes and find nothing but a frank kindliness. There was no longer any need

for self-defense, for the quick parry and thrust of wit against will. She forgot that she was a girl and Merodach a man: she threw restraint and convention to the winds, and Merodach apparently had never known the necessity for either.

They made such a merry din that a knocking at the front door failed to disturb them, but presently footsteps upon the basement stair startled them into silence.

Dorothy glanced from Merodach to Bartholomew, but before she could speak the kitchen door swung open to admit Mr. Larry Cavanagh, *chapeau bras* beneath one arm, amber-headed cane a-dangle from a waistcoat button, a quizzing glass poised in long white fingers.

"Good ged!" said he, and stood transfixed with amazement.

Dorothy was the first to recover composure, but something of her gay confidence fled with the advent of the beau.

"To what, sir, do I owe the honor of this intrusion?" She sketched a curtsy, recognizing in Cavanagh an habitu   of Lady Forrest's tables.

"Holy Saint Bridget!" murmured Larry.

"Explain your presence here, sir, I beg," insisted Miss Forrest, striving to appear dignified in bobbed skirts and an egg-splashed pinner.

"Sure, I called to change the news. Didn't ye hear me, an' I hammerin' at your knocker the way it'd rouse the Seven Sleepers themselves, an' they snorin'?"

"But how did you get in?"

"Faith, wasn't the door on the latch? I heard voices, so down I came thinkin' I'd find servants, an' ask—" He broke off. "What in the name of fortune are ye at?"

"Preparing supper," returned Dorothy, with defiant calm.

"Good ged!" gasped Cavanagh, and sank upon the settle. "Supper? Ye've enough there to feed a company of dragoons."

"We expect company," she told him. "The rooms will be open to-night, as usual."

"But you—I was led to believe—'tis put about that—that Lady Forrest has found it—convenient to go abroad?" stammered the Irishman. "Rumor's tearin' round the parish with her tongue flappin' like the mad dog's o' Killoon. As a—a friend, I—I took upon meself to contradict every blessed story, an' come to discover was I perjurin' me soul—"

"My mother was called away on urgent business last night," began Dorothy, and tilted back her head to sniff. "O lud, something's burning!"

Further inquiries concerning Lavinia died upon the visitor's lips as Griggs emerged from behind the settle and darted to the oven.

"Good ged! Bartholomew the Grigg, as I'm a sinner! What, is it turned cook ye are, Barty, ye rogue?"

"Yes, Mr. Cavanagh, sir," stammered the bailiff, dropping a tray of steaming patties on the table

and licking his burnt fingers. "Yes, sir. You gentlemen do like your little joke. But, speakin' strickly for meself, o' course, I'm proud to do the scullery-maid, sir. What I says, yer honor, a man's no man as won't put out a helpin' hand to beauty in distress, sir, an' bein' as how the servants—"

Mr. Cavanagh heaved himself upright and advanced, white fingers extended. "Mr. Griggs," said he solemnly. "Ye may be a bumbailey by profession, but demme, nature intended ye for a gentleman! Sure, 'tis proud I am to shake ye by the hand!" He shook so hard that Bartholomew winced. "Miss Forrest, your most humble, admiring servant to command. Your spirit, me dear, is amazin'! Good ged, in your place most women would be vaporish!" He gesticulated, as one about to deliver an epigram.

"What tho' in Kaos all our hopes do lie?

We scorn to—er—to scorn—ahem, Oh demmit!"

He scratched a square jaw, smiling whimsically at Dorothy.

"From out the wreck Miss Forrest makes a pie!"

Merodach, hitherto unobserved, lounged forward from the shadows of the big basement kitchen.

"Good ged!" exploded Cavanagh, swinging round. "I should know that voice. Merodach! What under the sun brings you here?"

"I'm in hiding until to-night." Merodach proceeded to explain.

"Good ged! A door in a cupboard? Never! Merodach, ye're romancin'!"

"No, sir. These houses were built to accommodate the Court of—a certain exalted person," grinned Merodach. "To save much running to and fro, I am creditably informed that doors led from one house to the next. But—'tis old history. Since when, ways of communication have been bricked up or otherwise covered over, and—" His voice dropped.

"Good ged! Sandbagged? What demned atrocity!" shouted Cavanagh. "The town shall know of this. I'll have Brooke hissed off the stage."

"By your leave, I'd liefer knock him off!" laughed Merodach. "Harkee, Mr. Cavanagh sir." They moved toward the door, the gypsy talking eagerly, the smile upon the other's face widening with comprehension.

"Gad, I'm with ye, ye can count upon it. Mum? Zoons, I'm mum as a mackerel. Ye snuff, Merodach? May I have the honor?" The lid of a tortoise-shell box snapped open, and the ceremony over, Cavanagh turned again to Dorothy. "Ha' ye been abroad yet, Miss Forrest? No? Then ye'll not have heard the news. Behold me, Mercury, bellman to the gods! Oyez—Oyez! Though to be sure 'tis too monstrous sad to make sport on't." He dropped his voice and his buffoonery. "Ye must know Sir Julian Carew died last evenin' quite sud-

denly. A heart attack, so some say. That's as maybe, he went out like a candle—phutt!" Larry glanced up and found the gypsy's eyes upon him. "Sure, 'an isn't it strange that death should shock us the way it does? A child comes into the world like a boat, an' is launched upon an angry sea: and none winces to hear o' that. But when the craft's brought safe to harbor, why then we shudder an' cry 'Horror!' Such is the perversity of foolish human nature. Well, Sir Julian was eighty, an' if rumor don't lie he'd had his fling!" He smiled, shrugged, and glanced from one to the other of his hearers.

"So his nephew Valerius inherits?" murmured Dorothy, memories of last night crowding thick about her. "'Tis said Mr. Ralph was his uncle's favorite."

"Ah now, there ye have me," confessed Cavanagh, warming to his tale. "A mystery surrounds us, me dear creature. Bath is all agog. There's little else talked of in the Pump-Room, and the coffee houses positively seethe with argument. Faith, an election's nothing to it. But not to keep ye in suspense—Valerius Carew is suspected of—er—hastening dear nunkie's end. For didn't the servant swear he heard Sir Julian speak of breakin' the entail in Ralph's favor, an' wasn't he taken instantaneous, the way he'd not time to do it? Sure, Valerius inherits, but there's a warrant out for his arrest on suspicion of murder, so—"

"Good God!" ejaculated Merodach.

Dorothy laughed. "Murder? Why, Valerius han't the energy to kill a fly. I passed him in Spring Gardens one sunny morning last week, dozing upon a bench, with a link-boy hired to fan them off his nose! I wonder he don't keep a negro page. O lud, murder? What fool issued the warrant?"

"'Twas young Ralph applied for it. He's vastly upset." Mr. Cavanagh rocked from heel to toe, pondering. "Well, me dear, he'd sufficient cause. Wasn't Valerius the last to see Sir Julian alive? Oh, I've positive information from the butler himself. Valerius sent him below-stairs of an errand, and when he returned Sir Julian was dead and Valerius nowhere to be found. Deuced suspicious, an't it, on me soul! Demme, as pretty a mystery as ever was writ to intrigue the patrons of circulator libraries!"

"And have they arrested Valerius Carew?" asked the girl. "Will he be brought to trial on such a foolish charge as this?"

"Good ged! How is it possible? Isn't it tellin' ye I am he's disappeared!" exclaimed Larry impatiently. "It's the most damning fact of all. Lodging in Gay Street ransacked, landlady swears he'd not been home all night. Inquiries at all the taverns, none had set eyes on him. Spies haunting the Baths and ambushed in the Abbey the way an earwig couldn't escape notice, an' all to no purpose. Our gentleman has vanished. There's some talk of a po'shay waitin' under the big cedar on the London

road, but I'm of the opinion that 'twas another affair altogether, in fact—ahem!" He floundered, glanced guiltily from the unconscious girl to the conscious men, and hastily changed the subject. "Well, positively I must fly. Ye open at eight, me dear? Good. I shall give meself the pleasure of comin', an' if I fail to persuade all the bloods in Bath to follow, demme, I'm no Pied Piper! Faith, we'll make a night of it. At eight. Miss Dorothy, your very devoted. I kiss your little hands. Plucky child, ye deserve to succeed. Barty, me cherub, adieu! Merodach, we meet at six. Oh never fear, man, 'tis too good a joke to spoil. *Adios!* I protest, 'tis dumber than the grave I am. Good ged, to see Middleton's face when you appear! Have ye clothes—a cloak? Well then, till to-night. Miss Dorothy, your most obedient!"

He bowed himself out, Griggs followed to see him to the door. Merodach and Dorothy stood among the litter of preparation in an uneasy silence. The care-free gayety of the morning did not return.

"Is Valerius Carew known to you?" asked Merodach at length.

Dorothy shook her head. "Only by sight. He don't attend the Assemblies. The town talks, but 'tis all conjecture."

"What's said?"

"O lud, the usual gossip! Mr. Carew's an enigma, and lays himself open to misconception, so 'tis his own fault if he's suspect." Dorothy shrugged, world-weary. "If nothing's positively known you

may depend upon't Bath will believe the worst."

"You're bitter," said Merodach, absently piling up the empty patty-pans.

"O la, yes! I'm suspect, too. A grain of truth in the town talk is enough to give rise to a batch of lies."

"Like the yeast in the parable," suggested Merodach.

"I've not heard if it."

" . . . 'which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal until the whole was leavened' . . ." quoted the gypsy soberly, his eyes upon her.

Miss Forrest shrugged. "Faith, you sound like the Abbey on a Sunday. Well, we must clear up, I suppose. That's the worst of cooking—washing up. Shall we dine here? 'Twill save trouble. There's pickled herrings in the larder and half a lumber pie. Push everything to one end of the table while I go wash my hands."

True to his promise Mr. Cavanagh arrived soon after eight accompanied by a dozen young fellows all boisterously exhilarated.

Dorothy, sedate in a gray silk at the head of the stair, was swept into the card-rooms in the whirl of excitement; deafened by the shouts and laughter, bewildered, a little disconcerted. She had intended to preside at the tables with studied dignity, but there was small chance of that among these mercurial gallants. They capered round the chairs; they clamored for wine, and when she brought it they

drank to Merodach until the lusters upon the candelabra rang against each other.

For the moment cards were neglected. They could talk of nothing but the big fight. New arrivals bawled for details, and the tumult subsided while Sir Harry Kirkpatrick, gesticulating from the back of an arm-chair as from a pulpit, told the story.

Crushed into a corner behind the tables Dorothy listened, comprehending nothing of the boxing slang of the day, but realizing that Merodach had won a brilliant victory. Her pulses quickened at the remembrance of her part in his escape.

"But, Harry, demmit, ye've started the tale in the middle!" shouted Cavanagh. "Han't ye forgot the rumor of foul play, an' we waitin' there the way we'd be nearly mad with the agonizin' suspense, an' every man of us stakin' his last groat on Merodach, an' he not comin'! Han't ye forgot the certainty of ruin, an' Brooke's supporters shoutin' 'Play or pay!' an' we feelin' as sick as the Wise Men o' Goshen with the green water lippin' round the edge o' the bowl! An' then the magnificent revelation of our Champion in the nick of time, risin' out o' the back benches like Venus from the sea, an' flingin' off his cloak an' pitchin' his hat over the rope! The overwhelmin' relief, the—"

"O lud, Larry, damn your rhetoric!" cried young Revell. "'Twas like this—now listen to a plain tale! We waited kicking our heels in Brooke's rooms until close upon the hour, when—"

"Merodach!" hiccoughed Captain Godfrey, sprinkling the company with a flourished glass. "Merodach—flower o' British sport! Demme, boys, gi' a rouse! Merodach!"

Mr. Cavanagh's voice cracked with his determination to be heard above the din. "But harkee, gentlemen, there was foul play! Hired ruffians sand-bagged him, stripped him, trussed him like a bird for the spit and shut him in a cupboard. And there he might have stayed but for—"

"What? You're drunk, Cavanagh!"

"What authority ha' ye for that tale? I tell you—"

"Authority?" vociferated Larry. "Wasn't it Merodach himself told me? An' yonder stands the nymph to whom he owes his release, demme, I might say his life and his reputation, for she—"

"Rat me! The little Forrest?"

"Doll, the decoy-duck? Never!"

"Bravo! Have her out!"

Dorothy found herself tossed up on to a table, and flushed, panting, a little dishevelled, faced the company, her hands pressed against her throbbing heart.

Glasses were raised and drained in her honor. Her name was shouted amid approving cheers. She could do nothing but stand smiling, waiting, until the uproar abated.

"She speaks!" cried young Revell, and clapped his hand over his neighbor's mouth.

"Silence! The Forrest makes reply!"

"Gentlemen," said Dorothy through dry lips.

"Gentlemen, for your kind approval, my thanks, but—I beg you—make less noise or the watch will bid me close the rooms, and faith, I—I must entertain to-night. Gentlemen, I—I know not what tales you have heard, but—but the truth is—my parents are from home and I needs must keep open house these two nights. So I pray you—will you—play—?"

She faltered, swayed, and passed her hands over her eyes; giddy with the sea of moving faces all turned in her direction, stifled by the heat that beat upon her from the candelabrum at her shoulder.

Late comers, craning their necks, a tip-toe on the landing, were aware of a sudden silence, the crash of a chair overthrown as a man sprang to catch the girl.

Then, "She's fainted. Open a window."

Cavanagh carried her up to her mother's room, laid her on the bed and tugged at the bell-rope. There was no response, although, leaning over the well of the stair he could hear the far tinkle of china in the basement. He waited, fuming at the delay; and presently ran downstairs, prepared to tongue-lash the tardy servants.

The bailiff, lounging over his supper in the kitchen, stared at the sudden apparition.

"Where the divil is the servant!" demanded Larry.

Bartholomew swallowed, stared, and swallowed again; that being at the moment all he was capable of doing.

"Where's the woman, what's her name—Jane—Janet? Miss Forrest's fainting—"

"There ain't nobody here but me," replied Griggs. "Yon's the vinegar in that black—"

"Good ged! Where are the servants?"

"Didn't the young lady tell ye? Lady Forrest skedaddled last night, an' her woman ain't to be found, neither. Drugged me supper ale, she did, the vixen, an' when I woke me mouth was like the bottom of a empty dustbin. There's none here savin' the young lady an' me. An' how did the fight go, yer honor?"

"Oh, Brooke was beat, counted out in the tenth round," said Cavanagh absently. "An' now the question is, what's to become o' Miss Forrest?"

"Merodach won, did he? Ecod, she saved him for it, an' put ten pun in my pocket!" chuckled the bailiff. "An' rat me! half o' that she shall have, bless her! I'd laid more'n I could well afford on young Merodach, but thanks be to missie, he come out on top!" He reached his hat from a bacon hook in the rafters, and placing it upside down upon the table, solemnly pulled out a dirty knitted purse and counted the contents.

"Three pun ten. That'll be summat to be goin' on with, an' I shall get my winnin's termorrer. Speakin' strictly for meself, o' course, what I says is, *she* saved the fight, an' bein' now penniless, pore dear, half my winnin's she shall have, so—"

"Penniless?" gasped Cavanagh.

Griggs put the situation before him in language too forcible to print.

Cavanagh listened in amazement; consigned Lavinia to perdition; threw a curse or two after Sir George; and seizing the protesting bailiff by the elbow, rushed him upstairs.

Play was in full swing, but Cavanagh's sudden entrance arm in arm with Bartholomew, brought it to a pause.

"What now, Larry?"

"Who's your friend?"

"Demme, a bum! What the devil d'ye bring him here—?"

"Lud, Cavanagh, have some decency!"

"'Twill be my painful duty to report this distressing lapse to Nash!"

"Gentlemen! I'm askin' ye as a favor to let this—gentleman have a word wi' ye!" Something in his tone silenced them. They sat, twisted round in their chairs, leaning over the tables, half-risen, frozen into immobility by the unusual spectacle of the fastidious Irishman cheek by jowl with Bartholomew Griggs. The sudden production of Medusa's head would have caused no greater sensation.

A dull color rose behind the bailiff's stubble of beard. He turned his hat nervously, and the money clinked.

"Begging, by the lord!" muttered young Revell.

Griggs looked up. "Ay, sir," said he. "I do make so bold as to pass the hat, egged on by his honor Mr. Cavanagh, so to speak—"

"Faith, no!" shouted Larry. "Wasn't it his own idea, an' he puttin' in the half of his winings to start it? Gentlemen, I'll give ye a toast. Barty Griggs! God bless him for a warm-hearted old divil!" He drank, tossed his purse into the hat, and snatching it thrust it under Captain Godfrey's nose.

"W-what the dooce are ye about?" sputtered the soldier, wincing from the greasy head-gear.

"Han't I explained 'tis for Miss Forrest, the angel, an' she deserted by her blackguardly parents, foul fall 'em! A guinea, Captain dear? Good ged, will ye be shamed by little Barty? Boys, I tell ye there'd ha' been no fight at all but for Miss Forrest, an' where should we ha' been, an' we backing Mero-dach to our last crown?" With a running fire of banter and cajolery he went round the tables, shaking Barty's disreputable hat until it grew too heavy to shake. For having grasped the fact that Dorothy was destitute, the men gave heartily, and there was no more talk of play that night, principally because many had emptied their pockets.

"Gentlemen," said Cavanagh, nursing the bulging hat in both hands and gulping a little. "On behalf of Miss Forrest I thank ye exceedingly, and for the sake of Miss Forrest I'll be askin' ye to leave discreetly an' for the last time. Faith, Revell, don't ye see that we'll be doin' the child a kindness by keepin' away? She'll be postin' off to her aunt's to-morrow. I have the honor, gentlemen, to declare these rooms closed. Good night."

Laughing, cheering, slapping the bailiff on the

back, they left in twos and threes, until at length Mr. Cavanagh was solitary among the card-strewn tables.

He scratched his chin reflectively, staring at the money.

"An' will ye tell me how the divil I'll be givin' it to her?" said he. "Good ged, what if she's angry? Deuced delicate job, on me soul!" He tip-toed to the door and listened, suddenly terrified lest Dorothy should catch him there and demand an explanation. There was no sound above-stairs: below, Griggs was closing the door behind the last of the guests.

Cavanagh found some snuffers upon the chimney-shelf, extinguished the candles, emptied the bailiff's hat upon the middle table, and carrying it by the brim, crept down to the hall.

Bartholomew met him as he reached the foot of the stair, and for a moment there was a supremely uncomfortable silence.

"Your hat, Griggs," said Larry at length. "Can you find mine?" The bailiff brought it from the morning-room? "Thank'ee." Mr. Cavanagh swung himself into his cloak, took hat and stick and turned toward the door. "Er—I've left the—the money on the table," said he a little sheepishly. "No doubt Miss Forrest'll think 'tis her winnings. Tell her Mrs. D'Este was acting banker. No need to be sayin' more, eh, Barty? She'll be asleep. Shut the door softly, ye rascal. Good night."

CHAPTER VIII

TRADEGY IN THE AIR

“**M**R. CAVANAGH, sir,” said Harris with an apologetic cough, “shall I admit him?”

Young Carew turned from his uncle’s desk to glance inquiringly at the servant. “I don’t know him, Harris, but then I’m still a stranger in Bath. Was he a friend of Sir Julian? Should I see him?”

“Well, since you ask, sir, yes, I would advise it. Mr. Cavanagh goes everywhere and knows everyone. And in the matter of—ahem—of the search, Mr. Ralph, he might be useful.”

“Gad, he might! Beg him to walk in, and Harris—sherry.”

Mr. Cavanagh, somber in purple cloth, bowed to Mr. Carew, melancholic in black satin. The Irishman’s quick eye appraised the fashion of the coat and the embroidery of cut steel beads.

“Faith, parting is such sweet sorrow!” he mused, and commented aloud upon the engaging qualities of the deceased.

Ralph conducted becomingly: spoke in hushed tones of Sir Julian: poured wine, and used a black-edged kerchief to wipe his lips.

Compliments over, the two men relaxed a little and eyed one another across the decanter.

"Sure, ye have a look of Sir Julian about ye," said Larry, glancing from his host to the portrait above the hearth.

"A family resemblance, no doubt," responded Ralph. "I'm happy to be thought like him. He was a second father to me."

Mr. Cavanagh opened his mouth, reflected, and closed it again without speaking.

"I'm an orphan," added young Carew. "And an only child. Sir Julian was everything—"

"Faith, a sad loss!" ejaculated Cavanagh to cover the other's emotion; and floundering between courtesy and amusement, became platitudinous. "Well, 'tis the common lot. Old men die. Young men come into their own. But 'tis a week now since the funeral and here ye remain, mewed up— Oh, I make no doubt ye've lashin's of business," he glanced at the rummaged desk. "But for your own sake, Carew, ye should go about. I'd not be urgin' ye to attend the Rooms, but a canter before breakfast along Coombe Down? Sure, 'twould be no disrespect to the old gentleman, he was ever one for pleasure. An' if ye care for company, why, I'll be happy to join ye."

"You're very kind, Mr. Cavanagh. Later on, I'll take advantage—"

"Oh come, sir, to-morrow—"

"Gad, sir, I hate to appear discourteous, but—this odious affair has hipped me, I'll confess, and I—"

"Good ged, my dear fellow, I take you! Demmed awkward. But none can think the worse of you because—" he shrugged and broke off.

"You know Valerius?" asked Carew, a shade too eagerly.

Cavanagh threw out expressive hands. "As much as most. A queer fish, believe me. Ye've not met?"

"Yes. I met him here, that night. In fact I left him with Sir Julian. Tell me, sir, what d'ye make of it? I've gone over every detail until my head whirls."

"Faith, I've heard nought but gossip," responded the Irishman cautiously; and composed himself to listen to a personal narrative.

As Ralph ended: "So ye made the acquaintance of Miss Dorothy Forrest?" said he.

"I named no names!" cried Carew.

"Good ged, 'tis no secret. Didn't the child herself tell me ye saved her life?"

"You know her?"

"O lud, I'm a friend o' the family."

"Really!"

Mr. Cavanagh ignored Ralph's lifted eyebrows. "Ye've heard nothing of the Forrests?"

"Nothing but gossip," countered Ralph, smiling.

"They've left."

"Left?"

"Left the town, left England, for all I know—and left Dolly." Cavanagh outlined events, watching young Carew's changing face.

"Good God!" cried Ralph. "What inhuman brutes!"

"The child was penniless, friendless, but she has the divil's own pluck. Will ye believe me, Carew, she vowed she'd run the tables and win enough to take her down to Sussex, an' she with no more real knowledge of faro than a kitten playing with dead leaves."

"But she told me 'twas true she was a decoy."

"Zoons, man! What's that? She did no more than smile an' speak pretty, bless her! She never took a hand in the game. Lud save her, she don't know enough to win. She'd no notion her parents were sharpers."

"You amaze me, sir!" cried young Carew incredulously.

"Good ged, an' isn't that what I'm after?" shouted Larry. "The child's needin' a friend, demme, a lover! I'm too old for her, but you—you caught her fancy. Oh, 'twas plain from what she didn't say. She'll trust ye. A young man ridin' over the top o' the hill—that's what a girl's lookin' for from the time she can toddle, an' ye—"

"But she forbid me the house," began Ralph, dazed by the other's vehemence.

"Oh, the divil fly away wi' ye for a fool! Of course she did. She'd not be havin' ye ruined by her Jezebel of a mother. But I'm persuaded the child's waitin' for ye to appear an' save her, an' faith, here ye sit like an old biddy, an' she broody!"

"Od rot you, sir, you must believe me when I

tell you that I knew nothing of all this! Sir Julian died while I was at the Rooms, and then I was compelled to post to London to see his lawyers. And since I returned—what with the funeral and this suspicion hanging over Valerius—” He broke off and paced the length of the room and back. “Where is—Miss Forrest?”

“Faith, an’ isn’t that what I want to know?” answered Cavanagh.

“You don’t tell me she’s vanished?” cried Ralph.

“She has, an’ ’tis drivin’ me distracted—”

“But why d’ye come to me?”

“Good ged, you were my last hope!” Cavanagh strode to the window and stared across the street where a litter of straw and torn paper before the Forrest house remained as evidence of the sale.

Aware of tragedy in the air, young Carew followed him.

“Is that the house?” said he. “I never knew. She wouldn’t tell me where she lived.” Curtainless, dusty windows stared at him like the unseeing eyes of a blind man. “Gad, I’ve been so rapt in my own trouble I heeded nothing that was going on outside. Cavanagh, if you’ll tell me how I can help—?”

The Irishman gulped. “We—we—demme, why should I be ashamed on’t? We collected enough money to take her down to Winterbourne, to her cousin’s home. The po’shay was hired, her baggage ready. The bailiff took himself out o’ the way while she came downstairs. An’ then, at the very

threshold, a girl met her. They stood talkin' for the space of a minute, an' then what does Miss Dolly do but pack her into the shay an' they drove off together. So much Barty saw from the area window. But she never went to Winterbourne, for the postilion was back in Bath next day. He'll say nothing. She made him promise to hold his tongue. O lud, if he'd not been the man he is I'd suspect him of murderin' the child for the money she carried. But I'd trust old Jake with Potiphar's wife herself, an' she clothed in jewels."

Young Carew listened, and thrilled again at the memory of Dorothy in the glow of the chandelier; in the gloom of the anteroom. Her hair had smelled vaguely of flowers—violets—he knew not what. It went to his head a little.

"I'll ride with you to-morrow, Cavanagh," said he. "If the chaise was back next day she can't have gone far. Where d'ye keep your nags? The Three Tuns? I'll meet you in the yard at seven."

But though they rode out day after day they gained no tidings of Dorothy Forrest.

CHAPTER IX

SPIDER AND FLY

THE explanation was simple enough, as most explanations are, once they are explained. As Dorothy crossed the flagged footpath to her chaise, a girl touched her on the arm.

"Miss Forrest?"

"Yes?" Dorothy turned and met the gaze of a pair of black eyes swimming with tears.

"I—Lady Forrest employed me as sempstress, and they say she has gone away—and she—she owes me an hundred and thirty pounds. Oh, I've the accounts writ out. 'Tis true, ma'am. I've had nothing but promises these two years, and now I—"

"Are you in Mrs. Deykin's employ?" began Dorothy, her hand upon the chaise door. "Wait a moment, Jake. I must speak with this woman."

"No, ma'am. I work at home—embroidery—fine sewing—" The poor creature was fluttering with anxiety.

"Beg pardon, miss," urged the grizzled postilion, touching his cap. "'Tain't wise to linger. Mr. Cavanagh said the quicker we was out o' the town, the better."

"Then get in, ma'am," said Dorothy. "I'll drive

you home and we can talk as we go." But it was the young sempstress who did most of the talking.

Dorothy sat silent, horror-struck, her heart cold within her; wavering between incredulity and tears; unwilling to believe that her mother could have been so callous, so dishonest.

She leaned out of the window to give the postilion a direction, and presently the man drew up at the entrance to an alley, dank with drippings from the eaves, dark even at midday, and lighted only by a feeble oil-lamp at one end.

"Wait, Jake," said Dorothy, and picking her way over the cobbles, followed the girl.

There was no food in the little house: no fire. A genial, childish old man sat huddled in a blanket beside the empty hearth, cutting paper dolls from a news sheet. Before him, round-eyed and breathless with delight, knelt a three-year-old girl, receiving each completed doll in cupped palms, kissing it, naming it with a solemnity befitting the occasion.

"This one'll be Agafa. Agafa, sit here nex' Josephine, an' nen you can talk. Cawoline'll go wound corner, so. Henwietta—oh, Gwandaddy, here's Jean!"

The sempstress stooped to lift her, and shoulder-high the little creature surveyed Dorothy with friendly, starry eyes.

"A waif," said Jean below her breath, and aloud, "Well, Celia, did you take care of Grandad?"

A solemn nod. "But Gwandaddy's fingers too cold to cut out soldiers, so dey's all dollies," said

the child, and thrust her own mottled hands beneath Jean's shawl.

Something took Dorothy by the throat. For a brief instant she wavered: Winterbourne, cradled in the bosom of the Weald, beckoned her: there would be violets now in Folly Lane: she could almost smell the faint incense of thyme and hot turf upon the sunny Downs. And even now she was on her way.

"If you'll let me see your account, ma'am?" she faltered.

Wondering, Jean set the child down and opened the door of a tiny kitchen, bare, piteously neat.

Dorothy dropped into the only chair, her heart hammering at her side, staring uncomprehendingly at the papers Jean set before her. The narrow writing danced under her eyes.

". . . a dozen night-rails. Two tucked pinners and four plain. A spotted muslin wrapper. A muslin gown curiously embroidered with butterflies. . . ."

Underlinen of her own was there, half worn out now, but still unpaid for: embroidered stockings: cravats for Sir George. Lady Forrest had ordered lavishly, and never troubled to inquire after missing garments. Janet had doubtless taken what she fancied for her own use. A hundred and thirty pounds—

Dorothy awoke to the fact that the girl was speaking.

"I wouldn't have troubled you, ma'am, but to-

morrow our landlord comes for the rent. 'Tis long overdue, and he has been—tolerant—” She choked. “I had to come to you, ma'm, because I've nothing left to sell, and I must keep a roof over our heads for Grandad's sake, and Celia's.”

Slowly from beneath her petticoats Dorothy pulled a hanging pocket; slowly she opened it and drew out a leathern purse heavy with money. Shivering, she poured it all upon the table, and for an instant sat gazing at it dry-eyed, breathless.

It meant so much to her.

There was a pregnant silence: then from the other room came the rippling music of the child's laugh, the chuckle of the old man, and out of that heap of gold and silver Dorothy counted seven shillings, and slipped them back into the purse.

“I—I've no real right even to this,” said she. “My—my parents are heavily in debt. So much the—the bailiff told me.” She swept the money together deliberately and looked up at the pale face above her. “Will you take this? And when I can I'll send the remainder. And will you forgive me that you waited so long? My sole excuse is, that I did not know.” She arose, frightened now that the die was cast; and leaving Jean sobbing upon the table, went out and shut the door behind her.

Celia looked up. “A new dolly,” said she. “Gwandaddy's done you! Look! What can I call her? What's your name?”

“Dolly,” said Miss Forrest. “Will you call her after me? Just Dolly?”

"Jus'-Dolly? (Funny name!) Jus'-Dolly, sit here by Mawia an' Susan can squeeze up a bit—" Her voice indicated the exact amount of squeezing necessary. She lay prone upon the floor, chin propped on one chubby fist, her free hand rearranging the circle of dolls.

Dorothy nodded to the ancient beside the hearth and left the little house with seven shillings in her pocket.

"I've changed my plans, Jake," said she, as the old fellow opened the chaise door for her. "I can't go to Winterbourne after all. Will you take me back to the London road? I'm lost in these alleys."

Expostulation was vain. Jake drove her to within a stone's throw of her old home, and there much against his will he left her, valise in hand, waiting in the shadow of the houses until the road should be empty.

Thus it came about that as dusk rose from the earth, cloaking the valley and the town while yet the sunlit trees upon Beechen Cliff glowed vivid green, Dorothy knocked at the door in the wall that enclosed Mrs. Bradley's gardens.

She disliked extremely the idea of being under an obligation to the woman, but she believed that Lady Forrest expected her to wait there until she could join her, and Winterbourne being now out of the question, she had no alternative.

She glanced up at the stone gateway, patched with green moss and orange lichens, somber in the half-

light; and for an instant she was on the point of retreat. Then slip-shod feet came shuffling over flags, and the girl picked up her bag and stood waiting, outwardly composed, although every pulse in her body was beating a vague alarm.

The weather-stained door shook as a bolt was withdrawn; a key clacked in the lock; the door was opened a cautious crack; and a hideous, swarthy face peered out at her in silence.

"Is Mrs. Bradley within?" asked Dorothy, in as cool a voice as she could muster.

A nod was her only reply.

"I would speak with her, if you please."

The bodyless face still gazed at her round the edge of the door in an uncanny silence. The round eyes opened a little wider, the jaw dropped.

"I've a message from Lady Forrest," urged Dorothy desperately. A man was coming along the road and she wished to enter unseen. She pushed the door with her shoulder and as the negress gave back Dorothy slipped inside, to find herself at the head of a little flight of steps that led into a square court laid out in flower plots. The house surrounded her on two sides, on the other a formal garden was enclosed by the boundary wall.

Having locked and bolted the door the black portress shambled down the steps and along the path to the porch; and here to Dorothy's astonishment she faced about and picking up a lantern, lifted it to the level of her eyes and stared at the girl for a long moment.

From somewhere within the house came the shrill yelp of a kicked dog: a door banged noisily: foot-steps padded along a carpeted landing and came softly, heavily down the stair.

The portress made an imperative gesture for silence, hid her lantern beneath a bench, pulled the inner door almost shut and with a hand upon Dorothy's arm, crouched motionless in the porch.

From where she stood the girl caught a glimpse of the square hall lit only by a wood fire; shutters were closed over the narrow windows; among the dark masses of furniture brass handles and candle-sticks caught the light and peered out at her like evil red eyes.

An amorphous, unwieldy body lumbered across the room and was lost in the shadows of the stair that led down to the kitchens.

The negress gave a queer gasp of relief and pushing Dorothy out into the court, made urgent, vehement gestures of dismissal, grotesque, vaguely horrible.

Dismayed, bewildered, Dorothy hesitated, protesting.

Night was upon them. From somewhere near an owl hooted like a jeering goblin: bats flickered about the eaves of the old house. It was impossible to walk back to Bath at that hour.

"I must see Mrs. Bradley," pleaded the girl.
"'Tis urgent. Let me in, I—"

The porch door swung open: a softly purring

voice broke in upon the one-sided controversy, for all this while the negress had not spoken.

"Who wishes to see Mrs. Bradley? Come within. Keren-happuch, what are you about?"

The portress dropped her arms to her sides with a helpless gesture, stooped for Dorothy's valise, and led the way indoors.

"Bring lights to the oak room," said Mrs. Bradley. "Madam, at your convenience." She stood aside at the door and Dorothy hurried by her, much as she would have shrunk past a fat black spider.

Having set candles upon a table Keren-happuch slipped away and Mrs. Bradley, grunting a little, lowered herself on to a settee, peering at the girl who stood, wavering, before she found a chair.

"I believe, ma'am, I have had the pleasure of seeing you dance at the Rooms?" began Mrs. Bradley comfortably. "Miss Forrest, an't it? Ah, I thought so. I never forget a face, and yours, my dear, is remarkable. Would you take off your hat? Such coloring! Your own hair? Ah, remarkable. Well, and so your parents have gone abroad and for the present you are without a home. What more natural than that you should come to me? Quite so. Doubtless your dear mother suggested it?"

"I'm persuaded she did leave a letter, ma'am, but somehow 'twas burned," answered Dorothy, surprised by the other's apparent knowledge of events. "We—I found your name upon a fragment, and 'wait there' upon another, and so I—I came, although—"

"Very wise," purred Mrs. Bradley, folding fat hands upon her lap. "Most sensible. And you have your luggage." Her small black eyes peered at the valise, and Dorothy had the sudden, absurd idea that she could see the contents through the leather. "Just personal effects. Quite so. We live retired, my dear. Almost a nunnery." Mrs. Bradley's shortness of breath made her sentences jerk out like wind from a bellows. "Yes. You'll need but few fallals. Now, if you'd be so good as to pull that bell-rope? I'm not as active as I was. Keren-happuch will light you to your room."

"But you should know—I ought to tell you that for the present I've no money," faltered the girl. "I can pay nothing, and I'd not wish to impose upon your kindness, ma'am. I thought maybe you—you could employ me as a sewing-maid, or—I understand clear-starching—"

"Tut, tut!" chuckled Mrs. Bradley. "Nonsense, my dear!"

"I—I should prefer to earn my keep, ma'am."

"Well, well. Doubtless we can find you occupation. But to-morrow is time enough to discuss that. Have ye supped? No? I'll have a tray sent to your room. Our meal is over." She heaved herself to her feet and waddled ponderously to the chimney-breast where hung an embroidered bell-pull: and presently in answer to a distant tinkle Keren-happuch shuffled in, listened in stolid silence to Mrs. Bradley's orders, and carrying the bag led Dorothy upstairs.

It was a large house, but in the darkness it appeared enormous and Keren's candle seemed drowned in the surrounding gloom. Dorothy stumbled after her and down odd steps and along narrow passages until they reached a garret bed-chamber set among a huddle of gables.

Here the woman put down her burden, drew white curtains across the window, turned back the bed-clothes, and lighting a second candle, went away.

The girl ran to the door and watched her down the stair, wondering at her continued silence, but convinced that she was friendly. Then opening her bag she unpacked what she would need that night, resolved that in the morning she would make some excuse to leave.

A vague horror possessed her: a horror of the silent house; the bloated, panting travesty of a woman below-stairs; the hideous old negress. In sheer desperation she began to sing to drown the thoughts that threatened to overwhelm her self-control and unpinning her hair, brushed it out. It fell in a shimmering cloak below her knees.

Keren came back with a loaded tray, caught sight of Dorothy's hair, and plumping her burden upon a table, stood staring; amazement, awe, and wonder following one another over her wrinkled countenance. So might the Wise Men have stood before Mary the Mother, adoring. She took a step nearer and fell upon her knees, one black hand stretched trembling to touch this golden miracle.

"What is't?" said Dorothy, amused. "My hair?"

Against Keren's cheek she thrust a handful, silky-soft, faintly scented, curling at the ends like clinging tendrils.

The negress gave a strange, inarticulate sob and wrung her hands, rocking on her heels, tears coursing unheeded down her face: suddenly she scrambled to her feet and with a peremptory gesture for secrecy, drew a wooden wedge from the folds of muslin at her bosom and thrust it beneath the door.

Amazed, the girl watched a graphic pantomime, and gathered that as there was no key to the lock upon her door, she was to wedge it firmly before going to sleep.

"Yes, yes," she whispered in response to the negress' mute inquiries. "Yes, I understand, and I'll keep it hid, but why— O heaven!"

The negress opened wide her lips and pointed down her throat. Her tongue had been cut out.

Seized with sudden nausea Dorothy fell upon the bed, sobbing, shuddering. Keren picked up her hand, kissed it, patted it reassuringly; gathered up that cloak of hair and plaited it into a shining rope, crooning monotonously below her breath. Then, motioning to the door she repeated her dumb injunction, hesitated, signed herself, and went away.

Dorothy wedged the door, listening with her cheek against the panels until Keren's footsteps died out along the passage. The house seemed uncannily quiet: the doors were shut: there were no lights about the passages.

Shaken, frightened, she sat upon the bedside and

ate what she could, drank thirstily, and slipping between the sheets fell asleep and lay in a heavy slumber until well into the next day.

Mrs. Bradley sent for her at noon.

CHAPTER X

THE PAPER DOLL

THE sweet, small winds of April came fluttering down the alleys behind Murfet Street: wisps of straw and scraps of paper rose in whirling eddies, and, silver-gray against the brilliant blue of the sky, a flock of pigeons wheeled above the housetops, circling lower and lower yet until with a dazzling flash of white wings they settled upon the gabled roof of the mews in Stable Lane.

Celia ran out into the roadway to catch another glimpse, her round face upturned, her hair on end, shrilling her commands to the birds to fly again. At that moment a tortoise-shell cat stalked along the roof and the startled pigeons rose with a prodigious clapping of wings.

Celia danced and clapped her hands, regardless of her fragile family, and half a dozen paper dolls fluttered sidelong to the cobblestones.

"O babies!" gasped the child. "All in de mud! Tut-tut!" She squatted to gather them up, clucking dismay, murmuring endearments, smoothing Maria's crumpled limbs, wiping a smudge of mud from Agatha's expressionless face; and a baker's boy,

balancing a tray of bread upon his head, came trotting round a corner and all but fell over her.

"Tired o' life, an't ye?" said he, halting with a jerk, and swore as a loaf dropped and rolled into the kennel.

Celia rose, pattered over to pick it up, wiped it solicitously on her pinner and held it out to him with a wide smile.

"Demme," sneered the lad. "'Tis no good. 'Tis a mask o' muck! Get out o' my way, rot ye!" And pushed the child aside as he ran on.

Celia sat down heavily in a puddle, stared for an instant in amazement, dug both fat fists into her eyes, and howled.

A shabby fellow came out of a huckster's shop, and crossing the road, swung her shoulder-high.

"Come now," said Merodach. "You're not hurt, baby!"

The child withdrew her fists and opened blue eyes, staring down at her rescuer's face, astonishment struggling with tears.

Merodach smiled at her, and that settled it.

"Howwid boy pushed me in mud," she began, her speech still punctuated with sobs. "Want to go home." She fingered her wet garments gingerly.

"Yes, let's," said Merodach. "Which way?" Celia considered, and gazing round caught sight of her dolls scattered over the road. She wriggled violently. "Must pick up babies. Put me down, man. Frank you. Oh, Josephine!" She looked from the loaf to the doll in her hand. "She's a

mask o' muck! Dear, dear! Mawia—Ooh, an' here's Jus'-Dolly quite safe."

"*What's* her name?" asked Merodach, stooping, hands on knees, to examine a paper lady in a brilliant gown and a quantity of yellow hair.

"Jus'-Dolly," explained Celia. "Jus'-Dolly. I named her after the beau'ful lady what came an' saved us. Jus'-Dolly."

The gypsy looked at the pink-chalked face and startlingly blue eyes of the paper doll. "Who makes these for you?" said he, a little breathlessly.

Explanation burst from Celia in a flood. "Gwandaddy. An' Jean bought me some chalks, pink 'n' blue 'n' yellow, after Jus'-Dolly had gone away. An' we had hot bread-'n'-milk, 'n' tea, 'n' stew, 'n' a gingerbwead dog wiv cuwwant eyes, 'n' *nen* we said: 'Fank-God-for-a-good-supper-'n'-please-bless-Jus'-Dolly-Amen!'"

"And is Jus'-Dolly like this?" Merodach touched the paper doll.

"Iss!" Celia nodded vigorously. "Jean showed me how to color her, but *I* did Agafa an' Jean an' Mawia— Ooh!" An ecstatic shriek broke from her as Merodach tossed her up on to his shoulder.

"Let's go home and get dry," said he, stooping for the muddied loaf. "Down here?"

Grasping a handful of black hair, Celia issued directions, and presently they entered the little house at the end of the valley to find the old grandfather drowsing happily before the hearth.

"Good morning to ye, sir," says Merodach, setting Celia on her feet. "My lady met with a mishap, so I carried her home." He told the old man what had happened, while Celia spread her babies to dry and trotted into the kitchen in search of a towel.

"Wub me, man," said she, reappearing and presenting a fat back.

Merodach hesitated.

"My granddaughter's out, sir," quavered the ancient, blinking. "Can ye wrap the child in a blanket the while her clothes dry? Jean'll be home presently."

Celia twisted her head round in a vain endeavor to see what would, in years to come, develop into her waist; and obeying instructions Merodach untied and unbuttoned until she slid out of her muddied clothing and stood—a plump, adorable seraph—demanding to be rubbed.

At length, cuddled in a blanket, she fell asleep upon her grandfather's knees, and having spread her small garments on a line above the fire, Merodach drew up a stool and filled his pipe.

"You smoke, sir?" said he, and lit up for the old man.

"Thank'ee, lad, thank'ee! I've not drunk tobacco for long, eh! a long, long time—not till t'other day, when my granddaughter brought me a screw. Eh, 'tis comfortsome, to be sure. I didn't guess how sore I'd missed it—till t'other day. Jean don't complain, but we were come to the very end—ah,

the bitter end. I know—I know. Eh, if they fine folk as owed the money did but feel the pinch, no fire—no vittles—ecod! they'd not sleep till 'twas all paid up, ah, to the last farden." He fell silent, sucking contentedly at his pipe.

"Your granddaughter sews?" suggested Merodach, eyeing a pile of muslins upon a shelf.

The ancient shook his head. "Sews? Lor' bless'ee, sir, she sews all day an' sometimes half the night, an' taller dips do try the eyesight cruel. Beautiful work, sir, wonderful fine work my Jean does. But ecod, she'll ha' to wait years for her money—years! Madam must have her gowns by such an' such a day, but Jean can wait for her pay. A burnin' shame, lad, an' so 'tis. But what can we do? If she complains, they take their custom somewhere else."

"And these?" Merodach touched the row of paper dolls. "They're clever. You have an eye—"

"Ah, I did use to cut silhouettes, d'ye see?" explained the gratified old man. "Portraits, ay, an' pictur's, hunting scenes, hosses an' all, an' milk-maids wi' their cows, an' such. But I've lost my touch now, I'm too old. I make shift to snip these out for the little 'un. Yon's my Jean, 'tis not unlike. An' that's Maria, a chair-mender as lives nex' door. This un be Miss Forrest, a sweet young lady, sir, on my soul!"

"You—know her?" said the gypsy, staring at the paper doll.

The ancient wagged his head. "Why, not to

say know her. But she come here t'other day an' Jean showed her they bills, ah! 'twere a desp'rate lot o' money to be sure. Outstandin' for years. Oh, I'm spryer than I look, sir. I know a deal more'n Jean thinks. But I keep mum—I keep mum. 'Twould but vex her if she guessed I were wooritin'." He fumbled for his hanker and failing that, mopped tears from his withered cheeks with a threadbare cuff. "Dear knows what would ha' come of us, wi' that brute Arkinshaw a-clamorin' for his rent an' makin' sheep's eyes at my Jean! She'd ha' sold herself for us, sir, I know she would—the lamb! But praise God, it didn't come to that! No, sir. Miss Forrest paid up. Not all—oh dear no, not all, but enough to set us on our feet again. A sweet creature, sir—what's that? Who—ah, here's Jean."

The door opened to admit a sallow, dark-eyed girl, flushed with the wind, her hair escaping from her shabby hood, her arms full of bundles.

When he left, Merodach had learned all she had to tell of Dorothy Forrest.

CHAPTER XI

SUSPICION

YOUNG Carew, riding beside Mr. Cavanagh on the third day of their search, became aware that his companion was looking at something which had escaped his notice. Always a humiliating occurrence.

"What now?" said he, staring over the common in an endeavor to discover the object of the Irishman's regard.

Larry drew rein and for an instant sat silent, fondling his mare's neck. "Yonder's Merodach. We'll wait an' see could he be givin' us any news at all."

"A gypsy!" said Ralph, who had rather be dead than unconventional.

Mr. Cavanagh glanced at him and hid a grin. "Merodach, the Champion—oh, I'd forgot. Ye were not at the fight. He beat Brooke——"

"I believe Sir Julian spoke of it," admitted young Carew, and watched the new-comer's approach. "Gad, a fine animal!"

Down a little footpath that wandered through the gorse Merodach came swinging and halted a pace or two away, lifting his hand in response to the Irishman's greeting. He wore no hat, his striped

shirt was open at the throat, and a pair of sinewy brown legs gleamed below his patched breeches.

"The top o' the mornin' to ye, Merodach!" cried Larry.

"Good morning to you, sir, I was looking for you," responded Merodach, and glanced inquiringly from one to the other.

Cavanagh shook his head. "Divil a trace of her. An' have ye fared better?"

"I gathered some news yesterday."

Cavanagh caught the other's hesitation. "Oh," said he heartily. "Sure, ye can speak before Mr. Carew. He's after the child, too."

A smile lit Merodach's dark face. "She's given away the money you collected for her journey."

"What!"

"'Tis true. She paid every farthing of it to a creditor—a girl who sewed for Lady Forrest, and who was in direst need."

"Good ged!" ejaculated Cavanagh, and began to laugh. "Good ged! Now if 'tis not Dolly all over, bless her!"

"Little fool!" cried young Carew. "Why, there's not the faintest claim upon her, what—?"

"Miss Forrest considered it a debt of honor," said the gypsy. "Jean—the sempstress—told me the whole story. Miss Forrest kept only seven shillings, which were her own. The postilion confesses that he drove her back to within sight of the Forrest house, but Barty Griggs declares she never entered it. So—"

"The London coach passes," suggested Ralph.

"Yes, sir. I thought of that. But—seven shillings!"

A silence fell, broken only by the gentle breath of the horses and the scrape of Colleen's impatient hoof upon the turf.

"Merodach," said Cavanagh at length, "there's more on the tip of the tongue of ye."

Their eyes met and slowly the color drained from the Irishman's face. "Good ged, man! Not that!" he stammered, and made as if to push something from him.

"No," replied the gypsy soberly. "I've no reason to believe she's dead, sir. But—I fear she went to—Mrs. Bradley's—"

"Holy Mother!" whispered Larry, and sat as if turned to stone.

Merodach remained absently stroking Colleen's nose, and for an instant neither gave a thought to young Carew who fidgeted in his saddle, wishing to heaven they'd be explicit.

"In a way, 'tis my fault," said the gypsy at length. "I found some half-burnt scraps of a letter below Lady Forrest's table, and like a clever fool I needs must show them to Miss Dorothy. A word or two was readable and she jumped to the conclusion that her mother bade her wait at Mrs. Bradley's. That was before the journey to Winterbourne became possible, and—I'd forgot about it. I thought she was off in Sussex—I never dreamed she'd go—"

"But how the deuce do you come to be in Miss Forrest's confidence?" said Ralph querulously.

"Good ged, boy! What the divil does that matter?" cried Cavanagh. "Merodach, didn't the child know that—?"

"She told me Mrs. Bradley kept a finishing school for the daughters of gentlemen," replied Merodach.

"Holy Mother!" said Cavanagh again, and burst into hysterical laughter.

Outraged in every instinct, young Carew watched sulkily while the Irishman mopped the tears from his face. "I might remind you, sir, that you did me the honor to solicit my assistance," said he with superb dignity. "Unless you make me acquainted with the facts, I fail to see how I can be of use."

"Merodach, you tell him," said Larry helplessly.

In short, cold sentences Merodach laid the facts before Carew and the lad winced as from a shower of icy water. Doubts assailed him. Lady Kirkpatrick's sneering words rose from some corner of his memory and dinned in his ears. ". . . Yonder's the daughter, out hunting game for her mother's table. Keep out of her clutches. A vampire! Nash should forbid her the place! . . ."

And the girl herself? He saw her flushed like a cottage rose, shielding her cheeks with a gauze fan, denying him with resolute trembling little hands.

". . . I like you too well to have a hand in your undoing. It is all true—I—I am a decoy. . . ."

Gad! it was all true! What a blind fool he had been. Her very resistance was a clever bait. Innocent? Maybe. But what girl living as she had done could be ignorant? Well, his eyes were open now.

Rousing from his absorption, young Carew realized that the other two were covertly watching him, glancing at each other. What parts did they play in this tragi-comedy? What was the girl to them?

He recalled Cavanagh's visit of condolence. Lud, what was that but a cloak to cover some deep design? The Irishman's smooth tongue had won his sympathy, but what in heaven's name was Cavanagh's reason for inveigling him into the affair? He recollected that Cavanagh had acknowledged himself a friend of the family, had suggested that he should ride to Dorothy's rescue. Good lord, it was all one infamous plot to ruin him. It behooved him to walk warily, but sure, a fellow who had just returned from visiting all the great capitals of Europe should be a match for a mad Irishman and gypsy vagrant without a coat to his back.

Young Carew picked up his reins and ignoring Merodach, turned to Cavanagh.

"My thanks, sir, for enlightening me. I've not yet had time to become acquainted with Bath, but no doubt you know where this house lies? If the young lady's gone there, nothing remains but to fetch her away. I suppose 'tis merely a matter of a letter, warning Miss Forrest of our intent."

"She'd never get it," said Merodach with conviction.

Carew looked at him. "You've some knowledge of Mrs.—er—Bradley's methods, perhaps?"

Merodach shrugged. "I know she's a dangerous, unscrupulous woman. 'Tis said she goes armed. She's quite capable of shooting the child, if she knew we were trying to get her out. There's a ten-foot wall surrounds the house and a dumb negress keeps the gate. So much is common knowledge. A prison's less difficult to break because we—"

"Really?" Ralph's glance was withering. "Well, shall we meet to-night, and make the attempt?" Blissfully unconscious that he had never been nearer a horse-whipping, he gave his back to Merodach and looked at Cavanagh.

Larry shook his head. "To-morrow at the dawn we'd stand a better chance, eh, Merodach?"

Merodach dug clenched fists into his breeches pockets for better security, and nodded.

"Then to-morrow let it be!" cried young Carew.

A rendezvous was agreed upon and they parted at the edge of the common. Merodach disappeared among a clump of birches: Cavanagh, being bound for the Three Tuns, offered to lead Carew's horse: and Carew walked home to breakfast, engrossed in thought.

If plots were afoot, he would counter-plot, and he was convinced that he held an advantage, inas-

much as Cavanagh and the gypsy could have no notion that his suspicions were aroused. They trusted him, and he had the whole day before him in which to devise a plan.

CHAPTER XII

THE WATCHER ON THE HILL

WATCHING his opportunity with the tail of one wise eye, the little brown dog turning the spit before the kitchen fire suddenly scuttled out of the wheel, dodged the irate cook and yapping joyously made for the open door and the sunny garden.

"Oh, drat the animal!" exclaimed Maria. "I forgot to chain him. Here, miss—your legs are younger 'n mine. Catch him while I mind the joint."

Dorothy untied her apron, threw it over her head and ran out, thankful for a moment's respite. Meals were a sacred rite in Mrs. Bradley's house, and she knew that the cook dare not leave the spit to follow her. She was free for ten minutes.

The little brown dog raced across the formal flower-beds before the house and gambolling over the lawn disappeared among some bushes at the foot of the sloping garden.

The girl followed leisurely, calling, whistling to give some show of pursuit. Sparks thrust his head through a clump of guelder roses, put out a derisive

tongue and dived away again, challenging her to catch him.

Dorothy looked round, made certain that she could not be seen from the house, and sat down upon a log, her chin in her hands, her eyes absently watching the bubbling waters of a little brook that ran across the bottom of the garden and under a low arch in the boundary wall.

Great limes in all their glory of fresh leaves towered above her: beyond the wall the ground rose steeply, covered with trees and underbrush, until at the crest of the rise the sky showed pale behind the serried trunks.

Drawing deep breaths of the sweet air, Dorothy sat motionless, conscious only of the restful greenness of the place, the cooling wind upon her cheeks, flushed from tending the oven. The chuckling music of the brook lulled her into a half-doze; she stretched lazily, and opening drowsy eyes, caught a glimpse of movement among the trees fringing the top of the bank opposite.

A horseman, silhouetted against the patches of sky, disappearing as he passed the clustered tree-trunks, came slowly along the brow of the hill and halted to gaze down into the hollow.

Dorothy's heart missed a beat and then quickened to a rushing tumult. In a frenzy of suspense, of sudden wild hope, of agonizing fear lest he should turn and ride away, she snatched her white apron and waved it desperately.

A quick turn of the head assured her that she

was seen. She waited, breathless, her eyes upon the shadowy figure, hardly visible in the twilight of the beeches.

Then a twig cracked upon the lawn at her back and she spun round to face Mrs. Bradley, horrific in a scarlet Spanish shawl, her head muffled against the spring breeze, an ebony stick supporting her either hand.

It seemed incredible that such a mountain of flesh could have approached so silently.

Mrs. Bradley possessed a vocabulary of which a sergeant of dragoons might have been proud, and now she swore at Dorothy until her breath gave out and she could only stand gasping, impotent, her heavy face congested with dark color.

The girl remained silent, trembling, white to the lips; sickened by the old woman's revolting profanity; in terror lest she had seen the watcher among the trees.

"Cook sent me to catch Sparks, ma'am," she said at last. "He got out of the wheel."

"You don't catch dogs with waving pinnars at 'em," sneered Mrs. Bradley. "Who'd ye signal to?"

"Signal?" faltered Dorothy, resolutely keeping her eyes from straying toward the hillside.

"Ay. Explain."

"Sparks went into the bushes, ma'am, and I thought to 'tice him out to play and then catch his collar." Ah God! if only she dare to look to see if the man was still there!

"You lie!" panted Mrs. Bradley, and struck the girl across the shoulders with the stick in her right hand.

Dorothy shrieked, and out from the bushes darted the little brown dog, barking, snapping, threatening Mrs. Bradley with gleaming teeth and every hair upon his back a-bristle with rage.

Mrs. Bradley grunted with surprise and disgust, aimed a blow at Sparks and staggered backward beneath the unexpected fury of his attack. He leapt at the scarlet shawl, seized a mouthful of thick fringe and tugged, snarling viciously. Helpless, floundering, unable to keep her balance, Mrs. Bradley toppled over and lay, an unseemly welter of tossing petticoats and thick ankles, struggling to rise.

Dorothy glanced upward to the hill. The horseman was nowhere to be seen. Maddened with disappointment the girl caught Sparks by the collar, pulled him away, tucked him beneath her arm and stood regarding the wallowings of Mrs. Bradley with a feeling akin to satisfaction. The old woman rolled into a kneeling posture, and gasping, dishevelled, held out trembling hands for Dorothy to help her up.

"If I loose Sparks he'll be at you again, ma'am," says Miss Forrest coolly.

Mrs. Bradley found breath enough to curse.

Dorothy shrugged. "I'll put him in his kennel, ma'am, and return," said she, and walked away hugging Sparks who grinned and licked her chin.

Before the girl came back with Keren-happuch, Mrs. Bradley had had time to cool down, and suffered herself to be hauled to her feet with nothing worse than discordant grunts.

The negress helped her into the house, and Dorothy returned to the kitchen in a fever of suspense.

Had the watcher upon the hilltop seen? Would he wait? Was it—could it be Mr. Carew? Dare she implore his aid? A fortnight under Mrs. Bradley's roof had taught her the dangers of her position. Her appeal might be misconstrued, laughed at.

In her distraction she broke two plates and the cook boxed her ears, but at length her work was over. She soothed her sore hands in cold well-water, and drying them on her apron went out into the yard to give Sparks his supper.

The little dog, suffering from an attack of conscience, had taken up a strategic position at the back of his kennel, and no amount of flattery would coax him out; so Dorothy left him a platter of bones, and keeping in the shadow of the tall box hedges, reached the kitchen gardens. Here she crept to the back of the cabbage beds where a row of old currant bushes stood close to the boundary wall, and hidden behind these she made the best of her way to the brook side, breathless, eager, smothering a dread that he might not be there.

The glow of the setting sun still lingered in the west; a faintly green sky flecked with golden clouds

shone behind the hilltop: but beneath the beeches a dim twilight hid everything and any one who might be lurking in their shade.

For a long moment the girl peered upward into the woodland, her breath catching in a little, audible sob of disappointment: and then from the guelder bushes where Sparks had hidden, a man rose and strode toward her.

She knew him before he was near enough for her to see his face in the green dusk.

"You!" said she, backing, her hands at her throat.

The twilight of the trees turned her gold hair to silver, her face glimmered pale as a pearl: he caught both her hands in one of his and held her close.

"Did that beldame hurt you?" said young Carew, and bent his head to kiss her.

Dorothy hid her face in the lace of his cravat, trembling, relaxing in the blessed sense of protection.

"Gad, had I been within range I'd have shot the old hag, but my pistols don't carry so far."

"Were you watching, then?" murmured the girl.

"O lud! I turned my eyes away when she fell over! 'Twas no spectacle for a modest bachelor! Did the dog bite her, sweetheart? I prayed for it. Come—smile, or I shall think you're not glad to see me."

He coaxed her into some degree of calm, spread his cloak upon the log and sat beside her, talking until she had recovered command of herself.

Then: "How did you find me?" asked Dorothy.

"Oh, 'tis a long story—too long for to-night.

I've been riding out in search of you for days past, and then, from the top of the bank yonder—I saw you wave your apron."

"You knew me?" said the girl happily, and waited for no assent, so sure was she of his reply. "But I, I dared not hope 'twas you!"

Laughing, he reached for her, but she rose suddenly.

"I—I'd forgot. I must explain my—my presence here—in this house. I— O, Mr. Carew—you must believe—I implore you to believe that I came—innocently. Ah God, had I known I—"

"You distress yourself needlessly," began Ralph, getting to his feet in some dismay. He had not thought that she would weep: it was deranging his carefully considered plans. Gad, there was no telling what a woman would do. He had taken for granted that she would be overjoyed to see him: their meeting was to have been all laughter and pretty fooling, and here she was, putting him out.

"O heaven! You do believe me?" She clutched him by the shoulders and stared up into his eyes, stammering in an incoherent torrent of words. "I swear to you I knew nothing of this house—nothing! But for the negress I should—she tried to keep me from entering, she thought— Oh, don't laugh at me! She thought I was a saint. My hair—she loved my hair—she explained afterward, in dumb show. She has no tongue. The—others are afraid of her—but she—she loves me, and she saved— O lud, how can I tell you? I—I became

scullery-maid. The—the alternative that Mrs. Bradley offered was—unthinkable. I—O God, you do believe me? Say that you do! Say it—say it!” She tried to shake him, beside herself with terror lest he misjudge her.

“Dear,” said Ralph, soothing her. “If I did not, should I be here?”

With a stifled cry Dorothy abandoned herself to his embrace. “Keren has the key of the door in the wall,” she sobbed. “There is no other. If I’d escape that way, she would have suffered, and I couldn’t climb the wall. And even—even had I got out, where was I to go—coming from—such a place?”

“Hush, hush! I understand,” murmured young Carew.

She lay in his arms passively, submitting, but not responding to his lips, and when after a while she released herself he let her go unwillingly. She stood smiling faintly at his ardor, her hands busy with her tumbled hair.

“I shall bring a chaise and pair to-night,” declared young Carew, carried away by his own eloquence, almost persuaded that he meant honorably, forgetting Cavanagh’s conspiracy in the intoxication of her consent. “Is there a ladder here?”

“The gardener keeps one yonder in the tool-shed. But ’tis locked up,” she told him. “Where will you take me?”

“Where you will, sweetheart!” Locked doors were nothing to a determined lover.

"To Winterbourne, then. To my cousin's," whispered Dorothy, and slid her arms about his neck. "Until—until we are—wed."

The word brought Ralph to earth. It was one thing to rescue a young girl from the clutches of an ogress such as the Bradley, but quite another to present her to a curious world as his wife. He remembered his suspicions of the morning; Cavanagh's covert glances with the gypsy. Gad, it was all of a piece. The little hussy was acting. The very fact that she could laugh at him with the tears still shining on her cheeks convinced him that she did play a part.

He must keep his head: kisses made his senses swim: he must be cool. Yet it seemed folly not to kiss her while she still believed in him.

He tore himself away at last, vowing to return within two hours, and Dorothy stole up to her room and packed her few possessions with trembling fingers, wondering how he had discovered her, and yet too happy to harass herself with definite questions. There would be time and to spare during their journey into Sussex. He had promised to ride with her in the chaise and set all her vague doubts at rest.

She waited until the weary cook had passed her door on the way to her room, and then carrying valise and shoes, crept softly down to the hall. The tinkle of a spinet and a girl's voice singing was almost drowned by the clatter of glass and china which came from the oak room.

Mrs. Bradley entertained.

Dreading lest she should come suddenly upon her, Dorothy paused in the porch, where, a lantern at her feet, the negress sat dozing.

"My betrothed is coming for me, Keren," whispered the girl, her arms around the woman's neck, her lips against the dusky ear. "No blame can fall on you, for he's reared the ladder against the wall by the brook. I shall go that way. God bless you, Keren! Good-by!" She slipped one of her few precious coins into Keren's palm.

The negress hugged her joyously, kissed her hands, and watched until she vanished in the moon-lit garden.

Young Carew was waiting at the foot of the ladder.

CHAPTER XIII

LURCHED

TO Mr. Cavanagh, expectant at the rendezvous, came Merodach, footsore, breathless, splashed with mud from hair to heel.

"Good ged!" Larry leaned forward to peer into the gypsy's face. "What ails ye, man? What's happened?"

For an instant Merodach clung to the saddle-bow and rested his head against Colleen's satin shoulder, fighting for breath.

"Young Carew's—run off wi' her—" he panted at length. "Come to my camp. I must have water."

Cavanagh insisted that Merodach should ride, and the gypsy clambered to the saddle and sat propping himself with his hands upon the mare's withers, his chin upon his breast, dead-beat, dejected.

They turned from the road across a patch of turf dotted with gorse bushes, and halted at length in a copse of lady birches beside a trickling brook. A pale radiance stole into the eastern sky, a thrush began to chirp drowsily from the thicket, and from the earth arose that faint murmur as of a sleeper awakening, that always heralds the dawn.

Racked with anxiety, Cavanagh tethered the mare, lifted a square of turf from the smoldering fire, and putting on some dry wood, spread his cloak upon a heap of cut heather and sat waiting silently until Merodach was able to talk.

The gypsy drank and washed his hands and feet, and presently dropped full length upon the turf, turning his face from the glow of the fire.

"I mistrusted young Carew," he said, as Cavanagh began a string of questions. "Did you mark how he fell silent when I told him of Mrs. Bradley? He thinks us in league with her. O lud, sir, I know the type! He conceives himself a man o' the world, a shrewd fellow. Always suspicious of being fooled, he fools himself. He discovers insult where no offense is meant. He scents intrigue where nothing is further from the truth. Gad, I can read Ralph Carew!"

"But what the devil's happened?" cried Larry. "Where is she?"

"She's gone off with him in a chaise and pair. You see, sir, I'd an idea Mr. Carew meant to play us false, and if he did 'twould be before dawn. I slept here until nightfall and then hid in some bushes half-way down a bank that overlooks the Bradley's garden. He must have seen Miss Forrest, somehow, during the day, for the chaise hadn't been waiting five minutes when she came down the lawn. He climbed from the chaise roof to the top o' the wall and a ladder was ready on t'other side." Merodach smiled bitterly at the dejected Irishman. "We're

lurched, sir, sure enough. Carew knew we'd not move before the dawn."

Cavanagh swore. Merodach bit into a hunk of bread and cheese.

In the east the sky flushed rosily and a lark shot up from the wet grass, singing his way into the blue.

"They took the road to Devizes," said the gypsy, pondering. "I followed the chaise for a matter of five miles, to make sure."

"Devizes? Good ged, and don't the lad mean to take her to Winterbourne?" cried Cavanagh, suddenly jubilant. "Faith, 'tis but a boy's love of heroics. He'll carry off the imprisoned princess while we sit discussin' the way we'd be doin' it! Sure, he'll be back crowin' over us before he's had time to get there, the rascal!"

"You may be right, sir," admitted Merodach. "But—Devizes might mean London. I'll keep an eye on 'em, I think."

"You!"

The gypsy nodded. "I know every inch o' the country. I can borrow a horse—no, not Colleen, thank'ee, sir. Mr. Carew'd remember her. I'll go disguised, and catch 'em before nightfall. I'll write you—" He broke off, laughing at the Irishman's astonished face. "O lud, yes. I can write. You shall have news of me within the week."

"'Tis hankerin' I am to come with ye," said Larry wistfully.

"I know, sir. But she'll be safe—with me. And

you'd be recognized the minute you opened your mouth."

"Good ged!" laughed Larry. "I suppose that's the truth. But why not follow openly?"

"Because we're more like to learn Mr. Ralph's intentions if he don't suspect he's watched."

Cavanagh nodded soberly. "An' I trusted the lad! Well, I'll kick me heels in Bath awhile, an' keep an ear cocked for news. And Merodach, ye'll need money."

"Thanks, sir. No," said Merodach. He got to his feet, trampled out the fire, poured water on the ashes and hid a frying-pan and some dried wood beneath a heap of last year's bracken.

Cavanagh watched him intently. "Ye're an enigma, Merodach, me boy," said he at length. "I'm wonderin' who the devil ye are."

The gypsy laughed. "Gad, one who can keep his own counsel is a rarity in this gossip-market!"

"I confess I'm curious!"

"In that you're with the majority," returned Merodach, twinkling. "Some day, sir, like the heroes of the novels, I will sit down and tell you the story of my life. But to-night"—he glanced at the brightening sky—"to-day, time presses."

CHAPTER XIV

AT THE SIGN OF THE GOAT AND COMPASSES

IT falls to few of us to have our dreams come true, and even our dearest wishes, realized, never approach the glory of imagination.

Probably Eve's apple was a crab, or she would have finished it herself and gathered another for Adam.

At nineteen an elopement with a declared adorer seems the summit of desire. Merely to elope: to scurry, trembling, down a moonlit garden: to be caught in strong young arms and kissed breathless: to climb a ladder and be lifted in delicious peril from the roof of a waiting chaise: to lie against a warm shoulder and listen to divinely preposterous vows: merely to elope!

Dorothy had dreamed of it since she was old enough to read, but dreaming youth never looks far ahead. Sufficient unto the hour is the bliss thereof.

The very act of eloping was a delirious joy: the one thing lacking was a furious parent in pursuit. They had escaped almost too easily. Dorothy sighed and wriggled into a more comfortable position: Ralph wedged himself with foot and elbow to resist the capricious joltings of the chaise; and

glanced at the sky above the tree-tops, dark, intensely blue, powdered with a myriad stars.

Gad, what a night! He thought of Cavanagh and Merodach awaiting him at the rendezvous, and chuckled.

"What is it?" murmured Dorothy. "I was almost asleep."

Instead of replying he kissed her, sublimely unconscious of a footsore gypsy, watching their flight from the top of a rise.

So did Dorothy elope, content to live from one heartbeat to the next; supremely happy; never doubting the gallant who sat beside her, whispering extravagant professions of affection, fugitive vows, that for the moment convinced them both. And for both the moment was all that mattered. There was no past, no future, nothing but the dark chaise and the stars, and the ineffable wonder of young love.

The moon set, the stars faded one by one, a bird fluffed out his feathers, chirped a tentative note or two, and gaining no reply tucked head under wing again for another nap.

Slowly the east brightened: a rosy glow heralded the sun: gold, green, and crimson flared across the sky like welcoming banners in the path of a conqueror. Drowsily the earth cast off her misty veils of gray and purple, and with a faint sound of wings awoke at the bidding of another day. The heavens were all a-thrill with soaring larks before the sun rose above the dim horizon.

Breathless with delight Dorothy sat forward and watched the sky, the long shadows on the dew-gray fields, the color that crept into tree and hedgerow until all the world glowed vivid green. Never in all her life had she seen anything so glorious as the dawn.

The sight of the postilion, hunched in his saddle, sagging wearily to the movement of his horse, brought her to earth. The fellow was dog-tired.

"Ralph," said she, laying a hand on his inert shoulder, "Ralph, we must rest somewhere. The boy's exhausted."

"Wha'?" muttered young Carew, smothering a yawn. "Demmit, was I asleep? What now?"

"The postilion," urged Dorothy. "Look, he's tired out. Tell him to stop and rest a while, there's no such haste."

"Gad, he must make shift until we come to an inn." Carew leaned from the window. "Where's the next post-house, boy?"

The lad jerked upright and turned dazed eyes upon his employer. "Anon, sir?"

Ralph repeated his question and the postilion stood in his stirrups to look over the hedge.

"'Cod, sir, I don't rightly know where we be. I must ha' dozed off, your honor, an 'took a wrong turn. That'll be Wedhampton yonder. We can take a by-road. Only a quarter-hour's ride, sir." He touched his horses with his whip and they moved off again, while Carew threw himself back into his seat in a most unromantic temper.

"Young fool!" said he. "He should have kept awake. What's he paid for? Now heaven only knows when we'll breakfast."

Sighing a little as her dreams faded, Dorothy reached for her valise and unpacked a flask of wine and some cake. The glamorous night was over: in the cold light of day her lover looked sulky and a little dishevelled: his wig askew, his lace cravat under one ear. He laughed at her idea of a meal, not appreciating the difficulty she had had to secure even so much as wine and cake: but he ate ravenously and was unaware that they drank from the same flask.

Dorothy had sense enough to hide her disappointment, and denied that she was hungry; but when half an hour later they drew up at a quiet inn she retired above-stairs, drank a dish of tea, and lying down fully dressed slept until noon; leaving young Carew to lounge and yawn on the settle before the tap-room fire.

Dinner over, they started again with fresh horses, the post-boy surreptitiously picking straws from his clothing as he rode: and so by easy stages came at nightfall to a straggling village; and jogging through a herd of sleepy cows, halted under the sign of the Goat and Compasses, Benjamin Foster, Entertainment for Man and Beast.

Foster himself bustled out and held the chaise door as young Carew descended.

"You have rooms?" inquired Ralph.

"Certainly, sir."

"Then serve supper as soon as maybe."

"Certainly, sir. What would her ladyship be pleased to fancy? Stewed carp with fried smelts. A green goose, or lamb roasted with—"

"O lud! Country fare, with a vengeance!"

"I adore country fare!" said Miss Forrest, smiling upon the landlord to that old fellow's instant subjection. "Sir, your arm."

Young Carew offered his wrist: an ostler ran up and dragged out the baggage, and the host led the way indoors, pausing in the hall to call a chambermaid.

"Show the White Roe, Bess," said he. "Madam, will you walk upstairs? Sir, the coffee-room—" He threw open the door. "Can I fetch your honor anything? A glass of canary?"

Young Carew entered, discovered a gentleman in black dozing upon two chairs, and turned irritably.

"I prefer a private room," he began.

The landlord was apologetic. There was no other room. "Sure, sir, the Spanish gentleman—"

The figure upon the hearth yawned, sat upright, and scowled over his shoulder. "*Dios me guarde!*" said he. "I desired to be alone, fellow."

The landlord craved their honors' pardons. There was no other room. He trusted—

The Spaniard flicked impatient fingers. "Enough. Give him fresh horses. The next inn will suit him better than this."

"O sir, there's a lady," stammered Foster, concerned at the prospect of losing custom.

At that the man in black rose and bowed with a magnificence young Carew strove in vain to imitate.

"*Señor,*" said he with grave courtesy, "we have a proverb in Spain—'The best right is the oldest—possession.' This room is mine, but you will honor me by becoming my guests. Sirrah, serve the supper I ordered, and lay covers for three."

"Sir, you overwhelm me," began Ralph, a little awed by the assurance of the other's manner. Here doubtless was some great man, accustomed to unquestioning obedience.

"*El diablo!* 'Tis nought. Will you sit, *señor?* And landlord, a bottle of Oporto."

Relieved and beaming, Foster hurried out; and young Carew, throwing hat and cloak aside, crossed to the wide hearth and took the chair the Spaniard offered.

"I fear to discommode you sir," he began, restless under the other's flow of compliment.

"*Por dios, señor,* no! I expected rustics, clodhoppers. Egad, *señor,* wine loses half its flavor when drunk alone and without a toast. You and your wife are more than welcome!" He rose with lithe grace as a maid carried in glasses and a cobwebbed bottle. "You've not shaken it, my dear?"

"O la, sir, no!" she giggled.

"The corkscrew? Ha! *A mala cama es bueno colchon de vino!*" He glanced at young Carew.

"You speak my language, *señor*? No? Ah, then must I translate. Your glass. Sir, to you! Heaven knows how we shall sleep to-night and—'wine makes a good cover for a bad bed!' " He threw back his head and laughed, refilling Ralph's glass. "Gad, this cursed English climate chills my very bones!"

"Yet 'tis said 'tis the climate makes us what we are," quoth young Carew complacently.

"Indeed, *señor*? You have my sympathies!" He shivered and held out brown, heavily ringed hands to the blaze.

"You travel alone, sir?" said Ralph, wondering if he should venture to warn this stranger that so much jewelry invited attack.

"At present, yes. 'Tis my whim. English flunkies bore me, and my own man had the audacity to fall sick in—*el diablo*—what was the name of the place? Chick—shist—ah, Chickchester."

"Unfortunate!" agreed young Carew. "And what of the roads, sir?"

The Spaniard shrugged. "Roads? You call them roads? Bad enough for a horseman. Almost impossible for a chaise."

"Demmit," says Ralph, savoring his wine. "And I'm in haste."

"You are for Chickchester, *señor*? Then avoid—"

"No. We travel to London."

"Ah! Madam goes to court, doubtless. Señor, the bottle's with you."

The maid knocked and entered to superintend the laying of supper, and young Carew excused himself and went above-stairs to make a toilet. He found Miss Forrest at the dresser, brushing her hair.

"Who's there?" she cried as the door opened; and catching sight of Carew in the mirror, turned, blushing rosily. "Oh, 'tis you, Ralph. Did you miss your way?"

"There's a stranger below," said he, ignoring her question. "A Spaniard. I distrust these foreigners. D'you mind supping alone?"

"Here?" said she, astonished.

"Yes. I'm sorry, but there's no private room, and the fellow's drinking like a fish. 'Twill be more comfortable for you, Doll. 'Tis disappointing—but d'ye mind?" He pulled her up to him and kissed her. "I'll come up—later. Gad, what hair! D'ye know you're a beauty, Doll?"

She dimpled. "O lud, what woman considers herself plain? Loose me, Ralph—some one—"

"Oh, I told the landlord to send up your supper," said he, and as the chambermaid entered with a tray, he strolled over to the window.

"Hello? A gallery?"

Miss Forrest nodded a dismissal to the servant.

"Yes. The other rooms along this wing open on to it. Bess—the maid—told me they've been adding to the house. That's the courtyard below. The stables are on t'other side, and that archway leads into the road."

Ralph looked at her curiously. "You've been making inquiries. Why?"

"O la!" cried Dorothy, laughing a little shame-facedly. "'Tis more—more romantic. Look! If we were pursued—if we had to escape from the house 'twere easy to climb through this window on to the gallery and run down the stair into the court and so to the stables. Oh, I know we are safe—but an elopement—"

"Gad, what a little fantastic it is!" laughed Ralph, an arm about her. "Safe? Of course you're safe! Who's to pursue us?"

Sudden loneliness whelmed her: she clung to him and bit her lip. "No one, Ralph. None cares two straws what becomes of me. None but you. I almost could wish I'd a curmudgeon of a guardian."

"Take my word for it, sweet, 'tis vastly more comfortable lacking one! Interfering old creatures, for ever urging a man to—to do this or that. Well, supper waits. Lend me your comb."

"'Tis monstrous indelicate—before we are wed," faltered the girl as he took off his wig to smooth it, and flicked the dust from his shoulders with her brush.

"Nonsense!" laughed Ralph. "Don't be squeamish! Have I to ask permission of the church to kiss you?" He glanced in the mirror, shot his ruffles, and hurried off.

Dorothy sighed. He had not kissed her. Had her prudery rebuffed him? A Spaniard below-

stairs? It would have been prodigious intriguing to meet a Spaniard. Dark as a gypsy, doubtless: mysterious, fascinating. She wished Ralph had let her eat with them. Was he jealous? Was he ashamed of her? It was annoying to be shut up here like a child in a nursery. Almost she resolved to brave his displeasure and go down.

She went to the table and lifted the covers: a plateful of roast goose and greens. She loathed greens. Stewed fish, rapidly cooling. They had not even the decency to keep one plate until she had eaten the first course. Flushing angrily she looked about her for a bell; and found none. It was humiliating to be so treated. She should have been offered a choice of food: attended while she ate. Carew was altogether too domineering. She must teach him his manners.

A flushed, imperious maid confronted her in the oval mirror; she touched her hair, pulled out the crushed laces at her breast, her heart quickening with excitement and indignation.

She swept to the door. Just so would she sail down to sup with the Spaniard. Lud, she might even flirt a little to punish Carew, the presumptuous popinjay. She would—

Her hand fell on the latch. The door was locked from the outside.

Don Carlos received Ralph's apologies with an amazed hauteur that rather alarmed the younger man. Madam refused his invitation? Impossible! She must have misunderstood.

Carew was desolated, but in fact, Madam was excessively tired and in no state to meet so distinguished a traveler as the gentleman from Spain.

Supper began in an atmosphere of frigid politeness, but with the wine and walnuts Don Carlos relaxed a little; eyeing young Carew from the shadows of his black wig; leaning languidly in his tilted chair; his hand continually reaching for the bottle. But though he drank little he saw that his guest's glass was never empty.

Ralph considered him a very good fellow and recalled some of his European adventures that made the Spaniard chuckle and slap his knee.

"There was a little girl in Berlin," says Ralph fatuously. "A sweet jade, but—too plump—and silent! Faith, she kept her mouth that shut you'd be sworn her teeth fitted ill. But no! I made her show me one day. All her own and white as milk."

"In a silent woman," returned the Spaniard sententiously. "In a silent woman there is either ineffable goodness, or—the devil's own wiles!"

"Gad, that's true!" Young Carew found his glass brimming and drank carefully. The wine was too good to spill, a heady wine, full flavored. He hardly remembered to have tasted such before. Odd, to find a vintage in an out o' the way spot like this! He finished his glass. "That's true," he repeated owlishly. "They're deep, deuced deep!"

"A man of your experience should be—ha—safe." Don Carlos heaved a sigh. "Now I was brought up rustically."

"You astound me, sir!" exclaims Ralph.

"'Tis true. A boyhood passed among our vineyards, tied—as you say—to a woman's apron-string—oh, 'tis the damnedest dull dog's life! Me, I fall victim to every single woman I meet, and some—*hélas!*—who are not single. *Señor*, you drink nothing." He refilled Ralph's glass. "You did well to keep your wife above-stairs! Well for me, that is!" He laughed tipsily. "I make no doubt she's a paragon of all the virtues, hey? O la, la! These English women, all ice!"

Young Carew chuckled. "Oh, as to that, sir, you mistake. We are, in fact, eloping. Miss an't wed yet, though she thinks to be, to-morrow."

"Ah! *Mañana, mañana! Es eterna duracion la de aquesta tu mañana!* So you're for London, *señor?* A three days' journey—"

"'Twill serve my turn," said young Carew thickly, made to rise, and subsided again into his seat. "Rat me!" he hiccoughed. "This wine o' yours, sir, m—monstrous heady!"

"You find it so?" Don Carlos rose in some concern. "Let me give you an arm, *señor.*" He pulled the young fellow to his feet and steadied him a moment. "Now, shall we advance? Where lies your room?"

"The—the Whi' Roe," chuckled Ralph, lurching forward. "Mos' 'propriate. Upstairs, first on righ'. Got key somewhere, he, he! Made sure of her!" He halted at the head of the stair to fumble in a waistcoat pocket, and the key dropped

from his shaking fingers to the polished floor.

Don Carlos swooped upon it, and rising, shot out his left fist and caught young Carew beneath the ear. The lad went down like an ox and lay as one dead.

Don Carlos bent above him for an instant, listened at the head of the stairs; and then fitting the key into the painted door of the White Roe, opened it, entered swiftly, and locked it behind him.

CHAPTER XV

ALARUMS

MISS FORREST was in tears upon the bed and sat up startled, clutching at her disordered dress.

The candles on the dresser showed her, motionless against the door, a tall figure all in black: black cloak, black riding boots buckled with steel, straight black brows, black curls falling closely about a swarthy face.

A shriek died in her throat; she stared, marveling that his eyes were shut.

"Child," said the Spaniard, smiling, "are ye abed?"

"N-no!" gasped Dorothy.

He opened laughing dark eyes and swept the heavy wig from his head.

"Merodach!" she cried, and slid to the floor, pattering over to him in silk-clad feet. "Merodach? I thought you—"

"So did Mr. Carew!" said Merodach. "My disguise is a good one. Quick, on with your cloak—your shoes—" He strode to the window. "We've no time to spare. Carew'll recover consciousness, and—"

"You've fought?"

"Gad, no, child," he soothed her. "I floored him as I floored Barty Griggs—as I'd floor any man who meant you ill—"

"Ill?" she cried. "Mr. Carew means no ill, what d'you—?"

"Zoons, there's no time for explanation."

"You must explain," insisted the girl. "I eloped with him. Why should I leave him now?"

For an instant Merodach hesitated. "Where was he taking you?" he said at length.

"Where? To Winterbourne, to my cousin's, until we could be wed."

"He lied," said Merodach, and as she cried out indignantly, "Child, you must trust me. 'Fore God I'll tell you all when we're safe out o' this. He may recover at any minute, and—I'd not willingly fight him. Come, your cloak— O lud, you will have it? I tell you he boasted to me that he was taking you to London, and he laughed at the idea of marriage, and—he had the key of your door."

"O God!" sobbed Dorothy, dry-eyed, swaying under the blow. "Is this true?"

"I swear it. I stunned him as he tried to fit the key in the lock. He lies just outside—shall I show you?"

"No!" cried the girl, distractedly fumbling with her shoes. "No, I'll believe you, Merodach. What shall I do?"

"Come with me to Winterbourne."

Sobbing, trembling, she suffered herself to be

lifted to the window-sill, and huddled upon the broad ledge, waited while the gypsy dropped her bag on to the gallery and climbed out. It was all he could do to squeeze through the square opening. She followed; was set upon her feet and led down the outer stair into the courtyard. The chaise was standing beneath the dark archway.

Merodach hurried into it, made her sit upon the floor and covered her with the traveling rugs. Then he crossed to the stables and knocked upon the half-open door.

An ostler sat up among a litter of straw, rubbing dazed eyes.

"Where's Mr. Carew's post-boy?" asked Merodach, leaning forward into the dark stable.

"Asleep in the loft, sir. He's dead beat."

"Don't waken him. Put fresh horses into the chaise. A guinea if you're quick and quiet."

Accustomed to the vagaries of carriage-folk, the lad obeyed without question.

Merodach went back to Dorothy. "Give me one of your slippers," said he. "Have you an old one you can spare? Good. Can you find it?" He opened her valise upon the seat, and kneeling, she dug out a pink satin slipper, high-heeled, dainty.

He stood regarding it for an instant with a whimsical smile. "This is the oldest you have, child?"

"Indeed, yes. 'Tis near worn through. I'll not need it."

"No," said he a little grimly. "You'll not need it." He went out under the archway and em-

bedded it in the mud of the road. Then, hidden in the shadows, he stripped off cloak, coat and breeches, and stood clad in the shabby brown clothes he habitually wore. Rolling the wig in the disguise he tossed the bundle into the hay-mow above the arch, hid his jewels in a belt beneath his shirt, and from the roof of the chaise took the postilion's whip and cap.

The ostler ran out leading a horse in either hand.

"Have you a good memory, boy?" asked Merodach, buckling the off traces.

Tom Ostler caught the clink of coins. "That's as mebbe, sir," said he, grinning.

"Then let this drown it! You've been asleep in your stable since supper-time."

"Very good, sir."

"You saw nothing and heard nothing."

"Not me, y'r honor! Thank'ee sir. Yes, I do sleep uncommon heavy, to be sure." He led the chaise out into the highway; watched with professional appreciation as Merodach looked his horses over and got to saddle; and stood for a moment polishing the gold in his hand before he buttoned it into a pocket. Then, the road being empty, he stooped to examine something in the mud, swore beneath his breath, and returned chuckling to his bed in the straw.

"Ecod," said he. "Here's a pretty go!"

The chambermaid, remembering madam's supper tray, ran upstairs to fetch it, and discovered Mr.

Carew prone upon the door-sill of the White Roe, and bleeding from a scratch upon the temple.

Her cries brought the landlord, and between them they revived the unconscious gallant and helped him into an unoccupied bedroom across the landing.

"Wha—wha's happened?" said he, fingering his jaw; staring at a spot of blood upon his coat.

"Why, sir, Bess found ye a-layin' full length as it might be dead. It scared her proper." Foster handed a sponge. "I take it the wine got into your head, sir, an' ye fell an' cut yersel' agen the door-frame like."

Ralph grunted, feeling meanwhile in his pocket. "Where the deuce is that—where's my wife?"

Bess offered to fetch her; went to the White Roe, found the door fast; bent to call through the key-hole and saw that the key was in the lock.

"Madam's locked her door," says she, returning.

"Demme!" muttered Ralph. "That's odd! I could ha' sworn I had the key." He got to his feet and pulled himself together. This must be looked into. He perfectly remembered locking Doll's door before he went to sup with the Spaniard. Vaguely he remembered that affable stranger had armed him up the stair. What followed?

"Well," said he, ruminating. "She must be asleep. I can get into the room from the gallery."

Dogged by the innkeeper and the intrigued maid he went below into the court, and up the outer stair-

case to the gallery. The end window gaped blackly.

"This should be the room," he said, peering. " 'Tis devilish awkward. My shoulders—"

Foster touched him. "Let me climb in, sir. I'm smaller nor you. Madam won't hear me, an' I'll unlock the door. Bess, take his honor by way o' the Lion. 'Tis empty to-night, an't it?" He disappeared, wriggling through the aperture, and Carew, waiting while the girl unlocked the Lion, fancied he heard some vehicle drive off along the road, and hesitated, vaguely uneasy.

"This way, sir," said Bess, plucking at his sleeve.

He turned, still a little dazed, unable to collect his thoughts; and went through the empty bed-chamber to the landing, to find Foster in the doorway of the White Roe.

"My lady an't here, seemin'ly," said he, displacing a bob wig to scratch his pate.

"What?" cried young Carew, breaking past him into the room. "Not here?"

"De-camped!" chuckled Foster, scenting mystery.

"Fled?" shrieked Bess, all of a flutter. "Fled! Lawks, where's she gone?" She ran about the room—searching the tumbled bed, the empty closets, commenting aloud: "Not been slep' in, though she lay down. I'll wager she ne'er undressed, no, not she! A hairpin—powder—why, look, she eat next to nothing."

"Dear, dear, what waste o' good vittles," deplored the host, examining the neglected supper tray.

"The pillow's wet!" cried Bess. "Lud, what'd she to do, weeping?" She glared across the four-poster at young Carew, disconsolate in the midst of the room. "Feel that! She must ha' sobbed for hours!"

The indignant girl thrust into his hands the pillow, still warm, fragrant with lavender, wet with Dorothy's tears.

"Gad," said young Carew. "What a brute I've been!"

A lump rose in his throat. So she had lain there weeping while he drank with the Spaniard. He touched the damp linen, laid the pillow on the bed and went out with never a word.

Foster and the chambermaid gaped at one another.

"Where's mossoo?" said the girl suddenly.

"Which? The Spanish lord? He ain't no mossoo, Bess, 'tis a French word, for sure. He be set in the coffee-room, a-drinkin' that wine he brought hisself, as if my best Oporto weren't good enough for him. Where else should a be?"

"Go see!" cried Bess. "I'll lay he's at the bottom o' this, the black-a-vised furriner!"

Alarmed, Foster trotted downstairs, searched the coffee-room, the tap, the kitchens; hurried out into the court. "Tom? Tom! Where be that whelp? Tom, I say!"

A snore from the stables.

"Thomas Ostler! Hi, waken up, ye lout! Where be the furriner?"

Tom Ostler woke artistically, yawned, and blinked up at his master.

"Where be the Spanisher?" reiterated Foster.

"Lor' lumme," gasped the lad. "What's to do?"

"He an't in the house," bellowed the landlord. "Where be he?"

"Good lack, master, I dunno. I an't set eyes on un since he come. What's he stole?"

"Stole? Stole yer gran'mother! He's decamped, seemin'ly, an' his score not paid. Dang me, no more's my lady's!" Foster whirled about, counted the horses in the stalls and thrust his head into the yard. "Plague take it, the shay be gone!" he cried.

The lad retreated hurriedly beneath Grey Drake's manger. "Lumme, guv'nor, 'tan't no manner o' use a-kickin' o' me," he urged. "I bin asleep this hour an' more. 'Ware Drake's heels, sir! He an't safe if he's scart!" Grinning, he watched Foster scuttle across the court and out into the road. "'Cod," muttered Tom. "Now let un find the slipper!"

But young Carew had already found it, and was standing in the highway turning it about in the dim light of the moon, his eyes thick with tears.

"What now, sir?" panted the host, coming to a halt and staring.

"Her shoe," says poor Ralph with a gulp. "She went this way, landlord. I must after her. She can't have gone far, lacking a shoe."

"But what o' my bill? I'm like to be ruined, I am! The Spanisher's gone wi'out—"

"What?" cried young Carew and sprang at the startled host. "For God's sake, man, speak! Don Carlos?"

"Leggo my windpipe," gasped Foster, staggering. "How can I speak when ye— Don Carlos an't in the house, an' what's more, your shay be gone, an'—"

"A horse, then, you dotard!" cried Ralph. "Why couldn't you tell me at once? A horse!" He darted to the stables, shouting, and Grey Drake lashed out from the nearest stall.

"Mind, sir! Mind his heels!" Tom Ostler pushed young Carew out of danger. "Ye startled him. He's as nervous as a kitten; he'll brain any as ventures in, sir. Wait a bit. Soho, boy—soho, lad! Gently then."

Grey Drake looked sideways, lowered his wicked head and let fly again, and Ralph turned and ran from the yard, hardly knowing what he did, conscious only that Dolly was gone from him out into the night with the sinister Spaniard.

Was she afoot? The slipper seemed to suggest it. Was she driving? The absence of his chaise was significant. Dulled by the wine he had drunk and the blow he had received his brain refused to work. He had no plan, no definite design. He could think of nothing but Dolly, her golden hair, her trust in him, her tear-soaked pillow.

Sobbing, he ran on, dazed, crestfallen, the pink satin slipper in his pocket bumping against his thigh.

Gad, if only he might find her and make amends!

CHAPTER XVI

EXCURSIONS

MERODACH drove rapidly until the road, climbing through a pine wood, split in two and wandered away across a waste of heather-clad turf. Here he turned aside and, dismounting, led the chaise into the shadows of the trees and halted it back to the road, so that a chance movement of the horses would not betray their hiding-place.

He put his head in at the open window, prepared for tears, hysterics, frenzy: a gentle breathing came from the muffled figure on the floor: cuddled among the rugs Dorothy slept like a child worn out with weeping; her hair glimmered in the darkness, one pale hand pressed the rough woolen away from her cheek.

The gypsy drew back a pace or two, hesitated, and at length walked to the edge of the wood and dropped upon the dry needles in the shelter of a stunted fir. There would be time enough for discussion. Let the child have her sleep out.

He lay upon his face, chin propped on one palm, listening, watching, alert for a movement on the dim road, a sound from the waiting chaise.

Nothing stirred for half an hour; then from a distance came the thud of running feet drawing rapidly nearer: a man stumbled through the chequer of moonlight and shadow, and sobbing, panting, was gone.

Merodach stood up to see which way he took, and satisfied upon that point, returned to the chaise and opened the door.

A sleepy murmur reached him. "Ralph? What was it? I was almost— Oh!"

"We must talk, Miss Forrest," said Merodach. "Will you come sit in the wood, or shall I climb in?"

"I'll get out. Oh, how delicious it smells! You've not put the steps—"

He waited for no steps but lifted her to earth, reached for a rug and led the way to a moonlit patch of turf. Here he tucked her up securely, and sitting down at arm's length started with his encounter with Celia and the paper dolls, and told her everything that had occurred.

Silent, wondering, Dorothy listened: she asked no questions, she expressed no disbelief; it was impossible to doubt the gypsy's sober truth.

Then at his desire she told her side of the story; but coming to their arrival at the Goat and Compasses, broke off and hid her face in trembling hands.

"And now?" said Merodach gently, his eyes on her bent head.

She looked up. "What now? It is for you to

say. I trust you, Merodach. Ah, dear God—I trusted him!”

“Mr. Carew passed us in search of you half an hour ago. Judging from his pace he can’t last long. We shall overtake him within two miles.”

She sat upright, staring through the green gloom. “You mean to overtake him? What then? I thought you—you—”

“I’ve a mind to discover Mr. Ralph’s intentions.”

“Intentions? You told me he—”

“Ah, but he’s had a lesson since then!” Merodach smiled into her bewildered eyes. “He was sobbing as he ran up the road.”

“Poor Ralph!” said she, and wrung her hands. “Poor lad! He thinks he’s lost me.”

“You’d forgive him? You’d offer him another chance?” exclaimed Merodach.

“Lud, yes! I love him.” And truly she thought she did.

The gypsy fell silent, plucking at the turf, pondering woman’s amazing capacity for forgiveness, heartsick at the inevitable result. He could read young Carew.

Forgive him, and the mercurial rascal would dry his tears, forget all his good resolutions and become more selfish and domineering than before. Part them, and Dorothy would nurse her broken heart, would remember all Ralph’s engaging ways and forget all his shortcomings. Nothing remained but propinquity—and disillusion.

He sighed and got to his feet.

"You have a plan?" said Dorothy, casting off her rug.

"Half a one. Life's but an unrehearsed play, and if your fellow-actor gives a wrong cue you're out unless you're quick to gag. I never elaborate a plot. Set your scene and trust to luck! 'Tis the only way."

"And what part have I?" said she, laughing. He lifted her back into the chaise. "For the present, child, you're merely an interested spectator."

She protested at that, but he shook his head, smiling at her eagerness. "How can I tell you what will happen when I don't know myself? Lie hid, until your cue comes. I'll knock on the door when you may appear."

He led the chaise back to the road, mounted, and pushed on, following the way young Carew had taken; until a couple of miles farther a disconsolate figure trudging with hands in breeches pockets, hailed Merodach as he jogged by.

"Hi!" shouted young Carew.

"Hallo?" returned the gypsy, reining in.

"Can you tell me where we are, fellow?"

"Shotover Heath?" suggested Merodach glibly. If young Carew were lost one name was as good as another.

"How far is't to the next village?"

Merodach appeared to ponder. "Best part o' five mile, sir," said he at length.

Ralph swore. "Can you give me a lift?"

"Well, ye can ride on the perch behind if ye please. The shay be occipied, like."

"Who's within?"

The gypsy lowered his voice. "'Tis a body, sir," said he solemnly.

Young Carew recoiled. "W-what?"

"A body. The body of a female, sir. Ye'll not care to ride inside, I know, but ye're welcome to perch—"

"Good lord, are you an undertaker,"

"Hardly that, sir," deprecated Merodach, touching his cap. "I took on this job to obleege a lady. Tell'ee what, sir, ye can ride my horse an' I'll make shift on t'other un. There's no manner o' haste."

"But there is! I'm in the deuce of a hurry!"

"Ye warn't makin' more'n two an' a half mile an hour when we came up," said the gypsy, sliding to earth. "We'll double that, an' go easy. Gi' us yer foot, master. Up ye go!"

Carew found himself astride the near horse before he could expostulate.

"Stick yer foot on the pole, sir. Ye an't got no leg-iron, an' these two hosses be that lovin' they fair prop theirsels up agen each other."

Merodach pulled his cap over his eyes and mounted the off horse, sitting sideways, his shoulder turned to young Carew. He reached for the reins, clucked to his beasts and they moved off at a jog-trot.

"Travelin' late, sir," began Merodach amiably. " 'Tis a bit risky, like."

"Why?" asked young Carew.

"Footpads, sir. Thick as rabbits hereabout. Toby-men, too. One stopped a coach las' week, very gentleman-like, an' returned all the passengers' coppers. Come up, Dandy, you lazy oaf!"

"Then I'm lucky to have fallen in with you," said Ralph. "You're armed, of course?"

"Well as to that, sir, I be an' I bain't, as you might say. I've pistols in they holsters, but dang me if they'll go off. What's the odds? There be nought of valoo to steal, an' if we're stopped they'll let us pass, seein' we carry a body."

"O demmit, I'd forgot the corpse!" muttered Carew with a furtive glance over his shoulder.

"Oh, ye needn't worrit, sir," says Merodach coolly. "'Twarn't a case of infection. A broken heart, sir. That's it. Just a broken heart. Plaguy sad, sir. Come *up*, Dapple!"

"Did—did she—drown herself?" stammered Ralph, struck with sudden compunction.

"Lord no, sir! Just a broken heart. Dozens on 'em go that way. They doctors like to put long words to it, but ye can take it from me 'tis nought but plain broken heart. Lovesick, sir. Pined away. That's it. Come *up*, Dapple!"

Young Carew moved uneasily in his saddle but said nothing.

Merodach, sitting slackly, rolled to the motion

of his horse and continued to moralize, conscious of his passenger's acute discomfort.

"Love's a queer thing, sir, an't it? Nine times out o' ten 'tis all misplaced. The lass wastes her-sel' on a lad as don't care two straws for her—or t'other way up. An' the tenth time if so be they're both fond, you can bet your boots it'll all go wrong. Summat seems to have a spite agen lovers. If they don't wed they pines away, an' if they do wed—well, it don't seem to turn out all they'd hoped for, like. Nine times out o' ten they forget all their courtin' days, an' fratch like cat an' dog, an' the tenth time you can bet your boots—"

"O damn you, hold your tongue!" snarled young Carew.

"Very good, sir," returned Merodach, and fell to humming a mournful ballad of a maid in "Bedlam" wailing her banished lover.

They plodded on a while, until of a sudden Carew destirred himself.

"Demmit, what a fool I am!" he cried. "Pull up! She can't have come so far—I've missed her!"

"Anon, sir?" said Merodach, yawning.

"Pull up. I must go back. 'I've missed her—"

"Mebbe you was searchin' for some one?" suggested Merodach brilliantly.

"Yes. A—in fact—a young lady. Pull up, you dolt, and let me dismount."

"Was it by any chance the young 'ooman as vanished from the Goat an' Compasses?"

"Yes, yes!" cried Ralph. "How d'ye know? Have ye news of her?"

"I come that way myself," pondered Merodach. "Old Ben were in the devil of a fantigue, losin' two customers an' ne'er a sixpence in payment."

"Two? What of the Spaniard? I thought he'd run off with my chaise—I thought—good gad, I don't know what to think—I believe I'm going mad—I found her slipper—"

"Spaniard, sir?" said Merodach, interrupting Carew's incoherent exclamations. "Spaniard? Oh, *he* don't come into the tale at all. Ye see, the young couple druv up as it might be my lord an' lady journeyin' home from Bath. But it seems they warn't wed, sir, an' the young man got a bit hasty, as young men will, an' the young 'ooman smelt a rat, d'ye see, an' bolted. Small blame to her, poor thing. Ben's a good fellow in his way. Soft as butter where a petticoat's concerned. Swears he'll horsewhip the young rake-hell as caused all the upset— O lumme, sir! You'll be him!"

"Horsewhip?" shouted Carew, beside himself with anger and impatience. "What the hell are you driving at?"

"Driving, sir? We be bound for Nether Wallop, to be sure. Come *up*, Dapple! Ah, sir. You do oathe like a guardsman. A fair eddication to hearken to you, sir, that it be! Most instructive. Now what I says is, a new curse or two allus comes in handy— Oh, no offense, yer honor, no offense!"

He listened critically until Carew's breath gave out, and then:

"So old Ben were wrong for once," he pondered, and continued with a quick glance at Ralph's humped shoulders, "Old Ben can't abide to be nay-said. Swore you was a-wrongin' of the young 'ooman. Called you every bad name under the sun, sir. Gay deceiver, ah, an' worse nor that! Fair laid his tongue to it, he did. An' here ye be a-huntin' for the poor lass, that put about! Come *up*, Dandy!"

The clop-clop of the horses' feet punctuated a strained silence.

"The question is," said Ralph at last, "did Miss Forrest—is she—afoot or driving?"

"Ah!" returned Merodach profoundly. "That's the question. Was it to be Gretna Green, sir?"

"No, we were for London."

"Anon, sir?" queried Merodach, wondering if Dorothy could hear.

"London!" shouted Ralph.

"Ah. A powerful wicked place, they tell me, but more convenient nor Gretna, by a mile or two. An' if so be as ye come across the young lady, sir, I'll be proud to drive ye to church, once I've disposed of the body."

"There'll be time enough to talk of weddings when I've found her," said Carew sulkily. "Pull up, I tell you. I must go back."

Merodach drew rein at the crest of a little hill where a flood of pale light shone through a gap

in the trees that bordered the road. The moon was at the full: the horses' breath swirled past them in misty wreaths: from a distant village came the slow tolling of a bell.

"Eleven," said Merodach, glancing at the sky. "Whoa, lad!" He dismounted, passed the chaise door, slapped it with the flat of his hand and went round to young Carew, who with his right leg across the saddle-bow was rubbing cramped muscles into use.

For the first time the two men were face to face. Merodach laughed, lifted his head, took off his cap.

"So we meet again, Mr. Carew!"

Ralph sat as if turned to stone. "Gad!" he said at length. "'Twas you! I fancied I knew your voice, but—what the devil brings you here?"

"Business," returned Merodach airily. "I've a living to get, one way or t'other."

"Pho! Carting dead bodies!" sneered Carew.

Merodach shrugged.

"But you came past the inn? You've news of her?"

"Of Miss Forrest? Maybe. I'll tell you nothing until I know your intentions."

"Gad's life, what's the girl to you?"

"A woman to be protected," said Merodach grimly.

Young Carew slithered from his saddle, settled his cravat and shook his coat skirts into place.

"Now," said he. "You'll tell me where she is."

He set his jaw obstinately. The night air and his unwonted exertions had sobered him completely. Here was no blubbering boy, disappointed in his love-chase, but a man of affairs, arrogant, very certain of himself.

"You intend to wed her, sir?" insisted Merodach.

"'Tis no business of yours what I intend. She's mine. I took her out of the Bradley house while you and Cavanagh sat biting your nails and wondering how to do it! I—"

"You promised to carry her to Winterbourne."

"Well?"

"Yet this very night you boasted that you were bound for London—you scoffed at the idea of marriage—you had the key of her door!"

Young Carew sprang at the gypsy, but Merodach caught him by the shoulders, shook him to and fro and flung him off.

"Gad!" panted Ralph. "Were you a gentleman I'd kill you!"

Merodach laughed. "You have my permission to try, your sword against my bare fists. You young whelp! Come, take your whipping!"

Carew swore, reached for his sword, discovered an empty slit in his coat skirts and remembered that before sitting down to supper he had hung the weapon upon the back of his chair. Impotent, fuming, he stood watching the gypsy rolling back his cuffs.

"You cad!" said he at length. "You knew I was unarmed."

"Then we fight equally," smiled Merodach, advancing.

But this was more than Miss Forrest could support in silence.

"You are not to fight!" she cried, suddenly appearing at the chaise window. "I forbid it!"

"Doll?" gasped Carew, and made toward her.

She put out an arresting hand. "Keep your distance, sir. I think you owe me an apology."

"Gad, 'tis you are in the wrong!" cried Ralph hotly. "You elope with me one night, and the next you run off with a—"

Merodach slapped him across the mouth. "Hold your foul tongue, Carew!" said he.

A sudden mad jealousy seized the lad. He had rescued Dolly from the Bradley house, she was his. What right had this vagabond to interfere? He struck out rather wildly, and as the gypsy side-stepped he overreached himself and stumbled forward.

Merodach gripped him, lifted him, and tossed him into the tangled hedgerow.

From her post of vantage at the chaise window Dorothy watched the whole undignified fracas, and frowned to hide an insurgent smile as Ralph extricated himself from a blackthorn bush.—No one was hurt, and it was vastly romantic to be fought over, even if one champion were no more than a gypsy.

She watched, bright-eyed, breathing rapidly, eager to lose no fleeting thrill of emotion.

Back to the chaise, Merodach stood guard over her. Shin deep in the dry ditch young Carew escaped from the embraces of a too friendly bramble; and none noticed a couple of masked men who had crept upon them from the opposite hedge.

A curt "Stand and deliver!" startled all three.

Merodach, looking down the black barrel of a pistol, threw up his hands. Dorothy squealed. Ralph, rooted in his ditch, gave a shout of triumph.

"Rescued!" he bawled. "Good lads! A guinea each if you put the fellow out o' the way. We've been held up by him—you saw him throw me in the hedge, I—"

"O fie!" cried Dorothy. "Shame on you, Ralph, shame!" She wrenched open the door and leaped to the ground, pressing Merodach back against the chaise; her body, her outstretched arms shielding him. For an instant her shoulders were against his breast, her hair brushed his lips. Instinctively Merodach shrank away; put her from him; his heart pounding, his throat dry, every pulse in his body leaping with a strange and fearful exultation.

"Child," he whispered, "let be. I'm safe enough."

"Little fool!" muttered young Carew. "You've ruined our one chance."

The two footpads stood bewildered, staring from the dishevelled gallant to the supposed postilion and the panting, terror-stricken lady.

"What's to do?" said one, approaching the fellow who still covered Merodach with his pistol. "What d'ye make o' this, Greg?"

"Make? Od rot ye for a brainless swab! Leave 'em to fight it out an' get aboard. The nags are fresh. We'll show the preventives a clean pair o' heels an' make Southampton 'fore mornin'. Aloft wi' ye, lubber, an' I'll in the cuddy!"

The one clambered awkwardly to saddle, the other leaped into the chaise, stumbled on the heap of rugs and fell cursing. His pistol exploded harmlessly. Merodach held him down with one hand while with the other he dragged Dorothy's valise from the seat and flung a wrap after it. Then with a yell he slapped the astonished Dapple on the flank and sprang backward as the chaise lurched away: the lumbering vehicle rounded a bend in the road and disappeared, one door banging, the footpad bumping in his saddle.

Aghast at this unexpected turn of events, young Carew stood staring, anger swamped for the moment in amazement.

"What the deuce d'ye mean by that?" he cried. "You've let 'em go!"

Merodach picked up the valise, swung it and threw it over the hedge. The rug went after it. Then climbing up the bank he found a gap between two hazel stubs and called to Dorothy to follow.

"What in the devil's name are ye at?" demanded Ralph irritably.

"Those men are flying from justice," Merodach

told him. "I've no wish to be caught by their pursuers. They're smugglers, likely. We'll get out o' the road. Come!" He leaned down from the hedge, caught the girl's outstretched hands and pulled her after him through the opening. A rip of cashmere told of a torn skirt. Dorothy never heeded. Breathless with excitement and anticipation she clung to Merodach's hand. This was adventure indeed!

Grumbling, Ralph followed, and found himself in a ploughed field veiled with the fine, blue-green growth of young wheat. Shouldering the bag the gypsy turned along the hedge, reached the corner and followed a little track that ran beside the edge of the furrows. Dorothy stumbled after him. Young Carew, told off to carry the rug, floundered behind.

In silence they traversed the field, crossed a pasture, and came through a ragged coppice to common land dotted with yew and juniper, gray beneath the moon.

Merodach paused for an instant to look about, and then set out again, halting at last in a little hollow sheltered by a ring of trees. Here he dropped his burden, took the rug from young Carew, who was preparing to use it himself, and spreading it, motioned to Dorothy that she should rest. She sank down readily enough, her back against the bag, her fingers linked about her knees, watching eagerly as Merodach gathered an armful of dry twigs and small sticks and nicked away with flint and steel.

The glowing sulphur match lit up his brown face, clean-cut, serene, quietly amused. He knelt over the fire until it was burning merrily, and then, sitting back on his heels, unbuckled Dorothy's shoes and held them to dry.

"Mud's colder than water," said he coolly, although the touch of her silken ankles had set his heart racing again.

"Demmed officious in you," objected young Carew.

"O Ralph!" cried Dorothy. "How can you be so—my feet might have gone cold for all you cared!"

"Mine are like ice!" retorted Ralph petulantly.

"Then for heaven's sake come dry them and be civil!"

"Civil? Gad's life! Civil! 'Tis all I can do to command myself!" burst out young Carew. "Here are we, miles from anywhere, without means of conveyance, without food, without shelter—all through this cursed interfering gypsy! And you ask me to be civil! 'Tis more than can be expected—"

"From you," said Dorothy.

"From any!" he cried. "You're a sweet butter-tongued miss, an't ye?"

Dorothy bit her lip; choked back her rising tears; turned to the fire and Merodach. He looked up and held her glance and a sense of shame, of gratitude, of peace and utter security stole over her with the gaze of his steady eyes.

Young Carew squatted beside the fire, took off his

shoes, propped them to dry and let his damp stockings steam. It was monstrous uncomfortable, but he would have died sooner than go barefoot before a lady. A three-cornered tear in one revealed the white skin beneath. He noticed it and swore, and taking a kerchief from his pocket solicitously dabbed at a small red scratch.

None offered sympathy, and the silence remained unbroken save for the crackle of the fire.

Warmed, rested, intrigued by her extraordinary predicament, Dorothy watched Merodach, cross-legged beside the fire; and something in his pose reminded her of that night of terror in the gaming house at Bath when he had made a fire and sat beside it, talking to give her time to recover her composure.

He had taken command of that situation with an ease that was comforting: she looked to him now for guidance, confident that all was well.

They smiled at each other across the leaping flames, and somehow it suddenly seemed the most natural thing in the world to be there with Merodach, shut away from the blue darkness by that ring of orange light.

"Zounds, what a night!" groaned Carew, squeezing a microscopic splinter from one finger.

Dorothy tilted back her head to see the stars. "Heavenly!" she breathed, adrift in the pale glory of the Milky Way.

"We're in luck," added Merodach. "It might have rained."

"It may yet," grunted Carew. "Let's push on for shelter."

"There's no village within miles," Merodach told him. "We can as well spend the rest o' the night here as anywhere. Miss Forrest's in no case for walking far."

"Gad, your shoes!" cried Ralph, staring. "How's this? You lost one, and here you are with two!" He dragged the pink slipper from his pocket and slammed it on the ground vehemently. "I demand an explanation, miss! Let's get to the bottom o' this coil once and for all."

Dorothy caught Merodach's eye. "I think, Mr. Carew, 'tis you who should be offering apologies, said she, with pretty dignity. "'Tis you who should be humbly craving pardon. O lud, wait—you unmannerly boy—wait and let me speak! I consent to—to allow you to rescue me, believing that you meant to take me down to Winterbourne, trusting in your integrity, your honor. It seems I was deceived. You were for London. You had no intention of making me—your wife—" Her voice broke. "O Ralph, 'twas shameless in you—'twas cruel! Had I deserved that?"

"Gad's life, Doll, you're glib! Who told ye that tale?" began Carew, staring uneasily.

"Merodach!" sobbed Dolly, abandoning herself to sudden grief.

"And you take his word for it before mine? What d'ye know of him? You've seen him but once—"

"I know him better than I do you," cried the girl. "Merodach's helped me before. I eloped with you the second day of our acquaintance!"

"What d'ye know of him?" repeated Ralph, ignoring her interruption. "He's a common bully—a prize fighter. What's he told you about me? He knows nothing. For anything you can tell he's deceiving you. To-morrow I'll—"

"Ah, *señor!*" drawled Merodach, rolling big eyes. "*Mañana, mañana!* This to-morrow of yours lasts for ever!"

An oath died upon Ralph's lips: he sat rigid, frozen with surprise, his comely young face a ghastly mask in the yellow light of the fire. "You!" he whispered. "God!" Dazed, he staggered to his feet, glared from one to the other, mouthed something incoherent and plunged away into the thick darkness of the encircling trees.

"Oh!" moaned Dorothy. "He's gone!"

"Faith," said Merodach, "he'll not go far, child. See, he's forgot his shoes." He turned round to face her, propped himself on one elbow and poked the fire with a forked stick. "Let him alone a while to nurse his wounded vanity. O lud, d'ye think he's heart-broke? Not he!" He laughed and stretched one hand to pat her knee. "Let him alone, child. The poor fellow's vastly mortified to find he's been tricked. 'Tis no more than that. He'll appear again with the dawn, never fear."

Strangely comforted by the touch of that brown hand, Dorothy mopped her eyes, discovered her ker-

chief too damp to be of further service, and naïvely spread it to dry.

"W-what are we going to do?" said she.

"Do? Make for Winterbourne."

"Walk?"

He nodded. "How else? What money have you?"

She emptied her purse into her lap. "Four shillings and a crooked sixpence."

"And Mr. Carew?"

"I doubt he's left the most of his valuables in his baggage at the inn. And you?"

Merodach grinned and threw out an expressive hand. "So! We walk. You go with me, for safety. I go with you, as duenna. Mr. Carew accompanies us because he'll be too monstrous jealous to lose sight of you. At dawn we breakfast. You'll pack your clothing into three bundles for easier carriage. I make two dozen clothes pegs—and we set out."

He prayed that she would not inquire why they did not go straight back to the Goat and Compasses to recover Ralph's luggage and hire another vehicle. He required more time, more intimacy than ordinary circumstance would allow. Were he acting as postilion with Ralph and Dorothy *tête-à-tête* within the chaise, he could exercise no influence upon events, and young Carew would reinstate himself with nothing more palpable than promises. Merodach intended to elicit deeds. Hence the reference to clothes pegs.

Dorothy followed this red herring. "Clothes pegs?" echoed she, mystified.

"Why not? 'Tis a means of livelihood not to be despised." He drew a clasp knife and demonstrated with a piece of stick. "'Tisn't the right wood, but 'twill serve to show you."

She watched, fascinated with the play of his deft hands, until the finished peg lay in her lap.

"I've enough wire for to-day," said he, repocketing the coil. "We can buy more, to-morrow. You're sleepy, child. Lie here, back to the blaze." He made a pillow of her valise, tucked the rug about her and piling on more wood, stretched himself on the farther side of the fire, listening for any sound from the thicket into which young Carew had disappeared.

But nothing stirred in the shadows.

Ralph had flung himself down just out of ear-shot, and lay motionless, gripping the earth with fingers that for a time were unconscious of what they held. Then, when the first paroxysm of rage and dismay had passed, he became aware that twigs and small stones were crushed into his palms. He rolled over, shook his hands free of rubbish, and sitting propped against a trunk, clasped his ankles and ruminated sulkily, cursing his stupidity.

If he had kept sober, none of these unpleasantnesses had occurred. It was incredible that mere Oporto could have so bowled him over: Merodach must have put brandy in it, the swine. Who would have dreamed that he—that the Spaniard—medi-

tation merged into malediction. It was insufferable that a gentleman could not amuse himself without the intervention of a demmed pugilist. And Dolly? Gad, what did she expect, coming from such a place as Mother Bradley's? Pshaw! Oh, damn the women!

Feeling himself to have been abominably used, he slid into an easier posture, yawned, cuddled down among the packed dead leaves and dozed, rousing some hours later, racked with cramps and in the very devil of a temper.

Was ever heir to a baronetcy in such monstrous plight? Hatless, shoeless, supperless—no, by gad, he'd supped—ahem! Well, breakfastless, then. 'Twas not to be meekly borne.

He got cautiously to his feet, tripped over some obstruction and all but fell; then, stooping to see what had caught his toe, discovered a three-foot stick, heavy, knotted, damp but sound. For an instant he stood poising it in his hand, wavered, and crept stealthily from the shelter of the trees, treading softly in his stocking-feet across the little glade to the fire.

Dorothy, curled up like a sleepy kitten, lay huddled in the rug. Merodach sprawled on the other side of the fire, and between them a heap of embers still glowed, surrounded by a ring of flaky white woodash.

Still smarting under a sense of unmerited persecution, blinded with anger, childishly spiteful, young Carew paused above the motionless figure of

the gypsy, heaved up his club and swung it downward with all his force. But even as it fell Merodach flung himself to one side, grabbed his assailant's ankles and brought him toppling to earth.

The thud awoke Dorothy, who sat up blinking, peering through the dim light of earliest dawn, her eyes still heavy with sleep, her hands pushing back strands of her loosened hair. She discovered young Carew on his knees nursing a strained wrist, and Merodach breathing a little unevenly, tending the scattered fire.

"W-what was it?" she faltered, frightened at their silence.

"Nothing," returned Merodach. "Mr. Carew brought in a log for the fire, and—fell over me. There's no harm done." He blew the embers into a blaze, arranged some dry sticks across them, ostentatiously laid Ralph's cudgel on the top, and glancing at the sky, suggested that it was almost time for breakfast.

Carew took no sort of notice. Dorothy looked up, expectant.

"Wait here for me," Merodach said to her, and went off whistling.

Carew took out his handkerchief and bound it round his wrist, endeavoring with his teeth and his free hand to tie the ends.

"Oh, let me!" said the girl and knelt beside him, knotting the improvised bandage into place. "Was it burned, Ralph? I've an ointment—"

"No. I twisted it when I fell."

She remained looking at him; slid her arms about his neck; laid a smooth, cool cheek against his. "Dear Ralph," she whispered. "Dear lad—come, kiss and make friends!"

He caught at her, kissed her, buried his face against her shoulder. "O Doll," he said. "Doll, can you forgive me?"

She smiled, touching his cropped hair. "Dear heart, how little you know of women! Come, your face is all smeared with—tears—and woodash. Let me wipe it. There! I vow I should have been your mother, Ralph—now, let me go—Merodach—"

"Damn Merodach!" cried young Carew savagely. "Don't talk to me of him. Doll, come with me—come away now, while he's gone. We'll go back to the inn and hire another chaise and post to Winterbourne. I swear it! 'Pon honor, I'll marry you, Doll, spite of everything! I'll—"

The chill of her eyes, her lips' imperious curve halted him suddenly. He stammered, floundering. "Gad, I—I didn't mean that! I—I'm half crazed, Doll. Think what I've suffered in the last few hours! I swear I—"

"You think too much of your own feelings, and too little of mine," said the girl, drawing away from him. "Wait! I've forgiven you once. It remains for you to prove my forgiveness merited. We go to Winterbourne, but with Merodach. 'Tis all arranged—"

"O Gad!" sneered young Carew, nettled that he had not been consulted. "'Tis the first time ever

I heard of a girl eloping with two men at once!"

She stared and turned her back at him, fighting down her anger, her indignation, her tears.

"You are insolent, sir!" said she. "Tend the fire while I go wash my hands. I can hear a brook, somewhere."

CHAPTER XVII

YOUNG CAREW ACCEPTS A CHALLENGE

GRAY-GREEN, blue, amethyst, and purple, the hills lay half revealed in the dawn; ridge after ridge clothed with silent trees stretched away to the faint horizon, a land of dream melting into eternity.

Primroses starred the turf; below the sapling oaks wild hyacinths spread their misty veil; and wind-flowers, pink and white, hid among their leaves like shy children behind spread fingers.

Dorothy climbed out of the hollow and stood for a long moment sticken dumb with the beauty of the world. Gorse blazed upon the open hillsides, wind-racked blackthorn bushes showered their snow upon the brilliant turf. It was a morning of blue and gold: of hope, of glad certainty that all was well.

She went downhill to a chalk stream fringed with springing rushes, and kneeling, bathed her hands and face; her apron did duty as a towel, and refreshed, she went back to the copse to unpack her comb and a clean kerchief for her neck. Young Carew was not to be seen, and thankful for a moment's privacy she opened her valise and contrived to do up her hair and mend a rent in her skirt.

Then, remembering Merodach's instructions she sorted her clothing into three piles: one of dainty things that she would not need upon the journey; one for present use; one for emergency. Choosing a stout petticoat and a shawl, she made two bundles, pinned and knotted them securely and packed the remainder into her bag, singing happily to herself, falling silent to listen to the ecstatic birds; wondering where Ralph was gone and plaintively wishing that he were a little more of a man and less of a spoilt and rather foolish boy.

Perhaps when they were wed he would improve.

Having finished her preparations she sat beside the fire, adding a stick here and there, dropping dead fir cones into the red heart of the blaze and sniffing the sweet-scented smoke, conscious that she was hungry. It was an experience; never before had she gone without a meal, and last night she had eaten nothing but a little bread and wine.

As Merodach returned whistling through the bushes she rose and ran to him, childishly eager to see what he had brought. He untied his blue kerchief and spread it out, laughing at her curiosity, refusing to explain how he came by the batchcake, the butter in a cracked cup, six warm eggs, and a bottle of milk.

"You've forgot the salt," she teased him.

He grinned and pulled a screw of paper from one pocket. "We'll roast the eggs," said he, raking at the fire. "Later on I'll get a frying pan. Where's Mr. Carew?"

"I don't know," replied Dolly wistfully. "I went down to the brook and when I came back he was gone." She wavered for an instant and met his eyes. "He asked me to go back with him to the inn and hire another chaise and post to Winterbourne. You never thought of that, did you?"

"And you refused?" The gypsy looked at her curiously.

"Of course! I told him 'twas arranged that we went with you, and—he was angry."

Merodach motioned her to follow him to the fringe of the copse. "Look!" said he. "Which way did we come last night? Where lies the inn?"

Lonely, tree-clad country stretched away on all sides; in the distance the faint blue of the Wiltshire Downs faded into the sky.

"I don't know," confessed the girl.

"Then, believe me, neither does Mr. Carew. He'll be back again 'fore we've done breakfast. I'll make a smoke to guide him, he's no forester."

And sure enough he returned, crestfallen, sulky, fearful of being teased.

But Merodach made no remark upon his absence. He cut a thick slice of bread and butter, and passed over an egg and the remaining milk. Subdued, Ralph ate and drank and was coldly civil; but when Merodach trampled out the fire and buckled the half-empty valise upon his shoulders, Carew roused.

"Look ye," he began. "All this folly of walking to Winterbourne—positively, I forbid it. It's sui-

cide! Guide us back to the inn and I'll pay you anything in reason to drive us down to Sussex."

"You failed to find the road we took last night?" said Merodach.

Young Carew bitterly acknowledged that he had, and anathematized the God-forsaken country.

Dorothy winced. "O Ralph! It's beautiful—it's—"

"Demmed romantic, an't it?" quoth he, eyeing her. "Wait until you've walked ten mile, miss! You'll sing another tune!"

"I'll sing, anyway!" cried she.

Merodach laughed, and young Carew turned upon him savagely. "You—you damned prize fighter! You're a warlock—you've bewitched her! What woman reared as she has been could walk an hundred miles?"

"'Tis not so far," demurred Merodach, twinkling. "Miss Forrest's capable of it, I'll swear. I'm not so sure of you, sir."

"Rat me!" cried Ralph, piqued. "What she can do, I can!"

"I'll challenge you!" cried Dolly, afire with sudden exhilaration. "I'll walk to Winterbourne and I'll not sleep in a house on the way. I dare you, Ralph Carew! I dare you!" Bright-eyed, she faced him, a-thrill with the knowledge that Merodach approved her spirit.

"Gad," said Ralph, "'tis sheerest lunacy!"

"What if it is? I'll dare you to it!" Bubbling with laughter and mischief she snatched a hanker

from her bosom and threw it at his feet. "My gage, sir. Dare you take it up?"

"Zoons, Doll! You're maddening!" Young Carew stooped for the square of cambric. "I'll wager five guineas you repent 'fore nightfall!"

"Not I!"

"You'll not bet?"

"No. I've no money."

"Then five to nothing—five to this handkerchief—
—you repent before to-night!"

"Done!" said she. "Five guineas will be prodigious acceptable, sir."

They picked up the bundles and set out, laughing, friendly, following Merodach who strode ahead, whistling.

Half-blown cowslips nodded on the breezy hill-top; here and there wild orchis lifted frail, fairy-like petals to the sun; larks trilled in the blue, and the fickle winds of April drove light clouds over the heavens, patching the countryside with gold gleams and indigo shadows.

Merodach paused in a hazel bottom to cut three sticks, and trudged on whittling a smooth handle for Dorothy, an ear cocked for possible bickerings in his rear. But having accepted the challenge young Carew braced himself to his trial gallantly. Something of Dorothy's gay assurance infected him: he was merry, tender, thoughtful for her comfort. By noon he was carrying her bundle as well as his own slung from the stick across his shoulders; and he made no mention of a blister upon each heel.

Merodach regarded him with approval as they sat down in the shade of gigantic beeches that swung their boughs across the chuckling waters of a brook. Carew was sweating, was palpably tired, yet he made no complaint. He was a little out of condition, but a fortnight of hard work and plain fare at Mrs. Bradley's had done Miss Forrest good. She stretched herself like a sleepy cat, sighing contentedly, prone upon her back with her head in her arms.

"You've ointment in your bundle?" said Merodach, rising from the brookside with the milk bottle brimming over. Dolly nodded. "Then grease your feet, and give some to Mr. Carew. He's galled his heels." Ralph looked up, surprised. "Your stockings are rubbed though," added the gypsy.

They ate cold eggs and bread with a relish that astonished Carew. Demmit, there was something to be said for walking. It gave one an appetite that recalled schooldays. He limped off to the brook to bathe his feet, and Dorothy looked demurely at Merodach, who smiled in answer.

"Yes, the lad's gold at bottom," said he, watching Ralph's departure. "Blood tells."

"Then must you be gently born!" flashed Dolly, warm-hearted, impulsive by nature, her little affections blown away by the clean winds of spring, finding herself among the fresh woods and the steadfast, comforting hills of this most beautiful downland.

Merodach met her eyes and heaved the ghost of a sigh. "Oh, I'm a vagrant all through!" said he, rising. "Come, we must on. I'll wait yonder with Carew until you're ready."

Rubbing salve into her feet, Dorothy pondered.

If Ralph had been Merodach, and Merodach Ralph? What then? Would she have hesitated, as secretly she did now? Would she have wondered a little tremulously if her marriage with young Carew would be the dream of bliss she had imagined? She shook herself free of the thought. She was plighted—but no, Ralph had never formally asked her to wed him. He had this morning announced his intention of doing so, but had not waited for her consent, had appeared to take it for granted.

Merodach was right. Things never turned out as one supposed they would. Life was an unrehearsed play; it was better not to arrange details, but to trust to chance, to fate, to—Providence.

For an instant she relaxed, lying back to stare upward at the towering silver-gray trunks above her, conscious for the first time in her life that a greater power, a vaster knowledge than her own ruled events. No service in Bath Abbey had stirred her as did those moments in which she lay gazing into the depths of opening leaves that spread in a green canopy between earth and sky.

A squirrel ran down a branch, leaped—a miracle of a leap—to another: raced along to the swinging tip and launched itself into space with the ease and

certainty of a bird alighting. A second followed hot-foot, busy tail trailing, and the love-chase continued until she lost sight of flying lady and pursuing lord.

Flushing, she sat upright and pulled on her shoes. It would be well to fly love, to hold him at a distance until she knew her mind. She had been too ready to trust young Carew. At the end of their journey they would be more familiar with each other's thoughts, likes, dislikes. It was monstrous venturesome in her to have eloped with him on so slight an acquaintance, and yet—what else could she have done?

Sobered, a little forlorn, she rejoined the two men and they set forth again, keeping to grass tracks and by-lanes, avoiding scattered farms and isolated villages tucked away among the folds of the Downs, until with the early twilight they came to a highroad, dipping and climbing to drop at last into the green vale of the Test; and here in a bay of sheep-cropped turf wailed with flaming gorse, Merodach slipped the pack from his shoulders and stretched, easing weary muscles. Dorothy plumped down upon the bag, tired, but laughing. Young Carew spread the rug upon the grass and himself upon the rug.

"Come now," he wheedled. "Confess, Doll! You do repent!"

"No!" she cried. "A thousand times no! But I'm hungry."

Ralph pulled out a silk purse and tossed five

guineas into her lap, a little astonished that she instantly handed them to the gypsy.

"What now?" said he. "'Tis yours."

"O tally!" returned Dorothy. "We're two meals in Merodach's debt already. How d'ye suppose he got breakfast and dinner? He must have paid some farmer's wife. And now we need a saucepan and a kettle and three mugs and a basket to carry 'em in—besides food and drink. Take the money, Merodach, and go buy. We'll wait here for you."

They spent that night in a tiled barn standing in the corner of a wheat-field. A loft at one end was Dorothy's chamber, and snuggling down in her sweet-scented bed, she slept dreamlessly until the twitter of swallows in the high-pitched roof awoke her.

She knelt upright to peer into the barn, half-filled with last year's straw, wrapped in a brown twilight shot with floating golden motes where the sun struck redly through a square window. Merodach and Ralph lay below: the newly acquired cooking-pots were spread upon the threshing-floor, beside two oddly shaped bundles which she had been too tired to examine overnight.

She crept down the ladder and stole across to open them. A red-brown shawl; strong, low-heeled shoes of thick leather; a couple of colored kerchiefs, and a man's felt hat and gray worsted stockings were in one: the other held a medley of ribbons, and laces, buttons, tape; ballads printed on long

strips of yellowish paper, and a dozen other odds and ends to be found in every peddler's pack.

Wondering, she turned them over, and looked up to find the gypsy's black eyes upon her.

"Gad!" said he, stifling a yawn. "How I've slept!"

"Your fingers are all inkstained," said she, staring.

"I had occasion to write a letter last night, and 'twas a vile quill," he returned coolly.

She held up a string of red beads. "Buy a necklace for your sweetheart, sir? Any tape, mistress? Needles—pins?"

Merodach laughed. "That's the game, child. You're to the manner born."

"And are these for me?" said she, weighing the shoes in her hand. "They're monstrous thick."

"They'll be more comfortable than your own."

"But how did you know my size?"

To her amazement the man blushed furiously, but he would not look away. "Faith, haven't I held your foot in my hand?" said he. "They'll fit. Try 'em!" He went out and she could hear him savagely breaking sticks for the fire.

The shoes fitted, the shawl went well with her work-worn peacock blue gown. She tied a kerchief over her hair and examined the effect in the little mirror she carried in her bundle. A glowing face laughed back at her: she could hardly believe she was the same girl who had been taken to the Rooms in a sedan that night less than a month ago.

"Zoons!" said young Carew, propping himself on

his hands and staring. "What under the sun have you done to yourself?"

She held up a ballad. "Buy a song, sir? Only a penny. Listen, 'tis a sweet air, and passing sad—

*'The water is wide, I can not get o'er
And neither have I wings to fly.
Give me a boat that will carry two,
And both shall row, my love and I.'*"

"Demmit," growled Ralph. "There's no need to make a fool of yourself. You might be a tinker's wife!"

"Better that than a gentleman's mistress!"

He winced, but Dorothy was laughing. "I'm dressing to the part," said she, arranging her wares in the big basket. "Merodach, Mr. Carew disapproves my costume."

The gypsy leaned against the open door and looked from one to the other. "Faith, 'tis safer, sir. Tomorrow's May Day and the villages'll be full of riff-raff. Miss Forrest would excite remark, tramping the roads in her own person. But as my—sister—"

"But what of me?" cried Ralph. "I'll not dress as a vagrant to pleasure you!"

Merodach twinkled at Dorothy, who threw back her head and laughed whole-heartedly.

"O lud!" sobbed she, wiping her eyes and rocking to and fro. "O Ralph! If you could but see yourself—here!" She caught up the little mirror and tossed it toward him, shrieking with delight at his fallen face.

"Gad!" He caressed a chin on which the downy growth showed black. "I'd forgot I'd not shaved."

"Shaved!" gurgled Dolly. "O me! Your hair's full of dust, your cravat's torn, your coat— O Ralph! your coat!"

He took it off, shook it out and regarded it with a wry smile. "Sure, Merodach, you'd no need to go buy me a disguise," he admitted. "I must appear a very scarecrow!"

"I got a neckerchief for you," returned Merodach, smothering a desire to smite the lad jovially upon the back. "And some stockings and a hat. You miss your wig, sir, I imagine."

"Yes. I lost it somewhere on the road. I've the deuce of a cold."

Ralph stepped free of the straw and followed them out into the barnyard where a fire glowed and the sound and smell of frying bacon suggested breakfast. And when the meal was over they went soberly through the glowing red and brown houses of Stockbridge, still half awake and peopled solely by yawning apprentices staggering beneath shutters, and be-capped maidservants twirling dripping mops between their arms.

One or two gave them good morning as they trudged by, but Merodach merely nodded and pushed on; unwilling to anger young Carew by needlessly subjecting Dorothy to the indignity of chaffering.

So, down the wide, irregular street that spans the valley; across the blue, "green-haired" waters of the

Test, they came by downland and common, by lane and by-road to the lush water-meadows and the flower-strewn marshlands of the Itchen.

Snipe drummed in the swamps; sedge warblers chattered briskly over their nest building; and moor hens, convoying fleets of fluffy black chicks, swam with their quaint bobbing motion in and out the clumps of reeds and springing flags.

A farmer's wife, pausing at her garden gate, hailed Dorothy as she passed; and the girl turned and swung her basket forward to show her wares, shy now that the time had come to play her part.

Ralph humped his shoulders and went on out of sight: Merodach lingered, watching solicitously; and the farmer's wife, choosing needles and thread looked up in surprise at the girl's faltering answers.

"Ye're new to this game, my dear," said she, shaking her head. "Tape be worth more'n that. Ye'll never grow rich at this rate."

Dorothy smiled a little wistfully. "I've a lot to learn," she admitted.

"Bad luck, havin' to take to the road," suggested Mrs. Butterwick. "Troubles come to all on us, but I thank the dear Lord I've a roof over my head." She looked from Merodach, hung about with the pots and pans, to the tired figure of the girl. "Goin' far?"

"To my cousin's at Winterbourne," said Dolly.

"To Winterbourne in Sussex? Well now, that's my native! Mebbe ye know Mistus Coulter that kep' the Magpie? She were an aunt o' mine."

"I knew her well," said Dolly. "She died a year ago."

"Well, think o' that, now, you comin' from Winterbourne! My master han't no gurt likin' for pikers, but if ye're Sussex borned he'll say naun. I rackon ye'd like to come in an' set a bit. There's brencheese an' a bit o' cold pie. Come yer ways." She held the gate open invitingly. "Yer brother went on? Go pick him up, lad. I'll mother her."

Merodach nodded, dropped his pack over the fence and hurried after Ralph; while Dorothy followed her hostess up the gray flower-garden to a timbered, red brick house, built in intricate herring-bone patterns as though the workman had loved his trade.

Chatting amiably, Mrs. Butterwick laid supper at one end of a long table; showed Dorothy where the pump stood, and was making up the fire when Merodach returned with the reluctant Ralph. The gypsy was at ease, merry, grateful; but the unprecedented experience of receiving charity jarred young Carew. He ate and drank with his eyes upon his plate, and made no attempt at conversation; sitting aloof, intensely uncomfortable and out of his element, while Merodach and Dolly helped their hostess to clear away the dishes.

Presently in came the farmer, red-faced, jovial, clad in earth-stained coat and breeches round which clung the reek of wood smoke and the pungent odor of horses.

"Hey, mistus!" he called, holding up a handful

of white wool and dangling legs. "Warm some milk, will'ee? Here's a hob-lamb to be fed." And broke off, with a shrewd glance at the strangers. "Company?" said he, catching his wife's eye.

"Goin' home to Winterbourne," she told him.

"Well, ye're kindly welcome, whoever ye be! Larmentable purty weather we do be having', though the roads be middlin' slubby."

Dorothy reached for the lamb, her eyes wet.

"Give him to me, she murmured, and sat fondling the little creature until its meal was ready. Then, kneeling on the hearth, she fed it, unconscious of the picture she made against the black cavern of the great chimney: her shawl tucked about the lamb, her hair tumbling in shining masses to her neck, her hands busy with the bowl of milk and a sopped rag.

Merodach, answering Farmer Butterwick's questions, became aware that the man was watching, puzzled, curious,

"Well," said he, stretching wearily. "We must on and find shelter. Up wi' ye, Dolly."

"Nay now, said the farmer, there's maun to hurry ye. Leave the maid be, she be nigh flogged. Ye can sleep in my barn as well as other where. 'Tis May Day to-morrow, an' ye'd do a fine trade on the green at merrymaking—by gum! I'd near disremembered. What d'ye think, old 'ooman? Old Sam Isted were naun the better for what he'd took, an' he were drivin' that there camsteery horse Nightowl, an' canted out o' the wagon up along the

hill an' broke his arm, an' let-be-how-'twill, he can't fiddle for us. I promised Squire I'd rout round for another fiddler, an' now what wi' the old ewe so mortacious bad, 'tis too late to go into Stockbridge for Dick Lee. Dang me for a fool! There'll be a hem set-out-to-morrow."

"I'll play for you," said Merodach. "What'll they want? Country dances?"

"You?"

"Yes. So be as ye can borrow a fiddle."

"Oh ay, ye can have the loanst of old Sam's music, an' welcome! Fegs, an't this a bit o' luck? D'ye know any Morris toons? Squire's fair set on the Morris. He had a man down from Oxfordshire to learn some o' the village chaps. My wagoner's Captain this year. He'll run over the toons wi' ye in the mornin'. Fegs, an't this a bit o' luck! Squire'd never forgive me if I'd failed him. He do think a heap o' May Day, bless his heart! Ye'll stop, then? What a bit o' luck! Old 'ooman, can ye find a blanket for the lass, an' she can sleep in the hay-mow as snug as snug. Fegs, an't this a bit o' luck!"

CHAPTER XVIII

NEWS

KICKING his heels in Bath, Larry Cavanagh waited impatiently for word from Merodach. None came. The Irishman told himself that it was hopeless to expect a letter so soon, and looked about for something of interest that would keep him occupied until he could hear.

Bath danced and gambled; flirted, drank the waters; attended service in the Abbey, and paced delicately in Spring Gardens or King's Mead Fields. Nothing remarkable occurred to break the monotonous circle of daily existence.

The excitement arising from Lady Forrest's elopement with Mr. Cassillis soon subsided; none was seriously affected; here and there one would wonder where the daughter had hid herself, and gaining no reply, would wonder at something else.

Sir Julian might have been in his grave for ten years, for all the rumor of foul play. He was gone. All would go, soon or late. As gnats dancing in the sunlight continue their crazy whirl though half their number be of a sudden swept into eternity by the swish of a cow's tail, so Bath danced on, heedless.

Cavanagh grew bored, became petulant, sulked,

loathed Bath and yet could not leave it: determined to ride out each day in search of distraction and return only at nightfall in the hope of finding a letter. And it was during one of these aimless wanderings that he came upon Mrs. Janet, late tire-woman to my lady Lavinia.

Cavanagh drew rein at a wayside tavern and called for a stirrup-cup. Janet carried it out and waited, tray in hand, gossiping while he sipped. It was monstrous dull in the country, she averred, tossing cherry ribbons on a spotless cap. Give her town for seeing life. Bath for choice.

"'Tis monstrous dull in Bath just now, child," said Larry, and looked down at her with something of recollection puckering his brow. "Ged, han't I seen ye in Bath, my dear?"

"Lud, yes!" cried Janet. "An't ye Mr. Cavanagh? I was maid to Lady Forrest. What's new, sir, if I an't making too bold?"

"New, child? Nothing's new. There's been no excitement since Sir Julian Carew was murdered."

"Lawks, sir! Murdered? I han't heard of that." Janet looked up, eager for detail. "Last time I saw the old gentleman he seemed hale enough. A chin cough, but 'tis nothing. He was spry enough the night of his eightieth birthday, entertaining his two nevvies and laying down the law that strampageous! Ho, I couldn't hear what was said, but I saw everything after the major-domo drew the curtains back."

"The night of his eightieth birthday?" shouted Cavanagh staring at her. "Is it sure ye are, Jenny?"

"Sure? Why shouldn't I be sure? Faith, I've enough to remember it by. 'Twas the night my lady left Bath, and I left her service and went to Laverton's to my aunt's. A widow woman, sir. I found her ill a-bed, and looked after her till she got about again. And then she wanted me to live with her and help with the market-garden, but the stooping do try my back, sir, something cruel. So when my savings were spent"—Janet's euphuism for the money raised on the clothing she had appropriated—"I came here as barmaid. But 'tis monstrous dull, sir, serving country clodhoppers, and never a gentleman among 'em to give me a tip."

"But Sir Julian?" cried Cavanagh. "Tell me of Sir Julian. 'Tis a matter of life or death!"

"Lud, sir, there's little to tell. Mr. Ralph Carew dined with him that night. They had out the gilt plate, and covers was laid for three, but Mr. Valerius didn't come till they'd done dinner." She meditated, plaiting her apron. "Mr. Harris pulled the curtains over the windows directly they sat down, so I couldn't see what they ate."

"See? Where the deuce were ye, child?"

"Me, sir? Oh, I was in our gaming rooms, preparing for the night's play. You can see everything that goes on in Sir Julian's dining-room, but the old gentleman caught me peeping once, and ever since then he's had candles lit and the curtains

drawn while he dines, no matter how light it is. Selfish, I call it!"

"I'll give you a guinea if ye'll tell me a straightforward tale of all you saw that night," said Cavanagh, chafing at her circumlocution. He dismounted, and tying Colleen to the ring, sat down upon a bench against the sun-warmed wall of the tavern. "Come, take your time."

"They must ha' dined about four," mused Janet, frowning thoughtfully. "We don't—didn't open our doors till eight and I'd nothing to do. I sat beside the window and watched the passers-by, for company. At five or thereabout, Mr. Valerius comes up in a chair and crawls out and pays the men and goes into the house. Nothing happened after that for half an hour or so. Then out comes Mr. Ralph very red in the face, and hurried down to town, bound for the Rooms, belike. In fact, I remember hearing Mrs. Darbey say he was to be there. After a bit I see Mr. Harris tear the curtains back. He flung up the sash, too, which I wondered at, seeing Sir Julian was troubled with the chin cough. He were took in a kind of fit, sir, gasping and clawing at his cravat. I could see Mr. Valerius held him round the shoulders while the butler give him a drink. Then Mr. Harris hurried out o' the room, and Sir Julian come to and seemed quite hisself. He were monstrous angered over something, thumped the arms of his chair and pointed to the door. Mr. Valerius, being a tired kind o' party, spoke soothing and patted him on the shoulder.

That made Sir Julian mad. He got up and threw an orange at Mr. Valerius, and Mr. Valerius draws hisself up very haughty and bows and leaps out o' window and stalks off down the street without his hat. Monstrous hurt, sir, as any one could see with half an eye."

"But Sir Julian?" insisted Larry excitedly. "What of him?"

"Oh, nothing, sir. He went over to his desk, walking slow but quite able, and took a key off of his fob, and unlocked it and began to hunt for something. I was waiting for him to pull out a secret drawer, but as ill luck would have it my lady called me just then, so I went above-stairs to dress her head, and she kept me running up and down nigh two hours so that—"

"Then you didn't know that Mr. Valerius was thought to have murdered Sir Julian?"

"Lud, no, sir! Murdered? What nonsense! I can prove he didn't, anyway, seeing the old gentleman alive at his desk after his nevvv left."

"Valerius jumped though the window, ye said?"

"Yes, sir. One hand on the sill, as easy as a cat. It did seem a bit odd, and him being such a tired kind o' party, but I could see he were terribly put about. He went off that rapid."

"Ye'd swear to all this before a magistrate, wouldn't ye now, Janet?"

"Lud sir, yes! Before any one," said she stoutly. "Write it all out fair, sir, and I'll put my mark to it. I'm not much of a dab with a pen."

Cavanagh threw her a guinea and spurred home to draw up the document that was to prove Valerius Carew innocent.

A letter awaited him.

"It come by the coach from Stockbridge, sir," said his landlady, thrusting her mutch round the crack of his door. "A shilling to pay, Mr. Cavanagh."

He nodded, tearing open the folded paper. "Faith, ye can put it on next week's bill in place o' them immortal candles which I never burn," said he, and read:

"HONRD. SIR,—All safe. We walk to W—n as quick as may be, ten miles or so a day." (A rough sketch map outlined the route.) "If necessary, address me care of Joseph Marsh, butler, Ash Holt Grange, near Hazelhurst. We should be there by Wednesday.

"Yr. obdt. hmble. servant to comd.

"MERODACH."

Mr.Cavanagh read this missive through several times; staring thoughtfully out of the dusty window, and suddenly casting his hat upon the floor, danced round it, whistling.

CHAPTER XIX

MAY DAY AT HAZELHURST

MERODACH was shaving at the stable door, having borrowed a razor, soap and mirror from Farmer Butterwick. Young Carew came out and regarded him with some envy.

"After you!" said he.

Merodach grinned through the lather. "I'm afeared ye'll look too much the gentleman, shaved."

"Then demmit, I'll not stop!" declared Ralph. "Come now, Merodach, don't be jealous!"

"Deuced subtle!" murmured Merodach, scraping away. "O lud, I take you. You infer, sir, that even shaven I could not look a gentleman." He made a leg, flourishing his razor. "Sounds devilish crude, but 'tis true, I suppose."

"You're a strange creature," quoth young Carew, swinging his feet as he perched upon the horse-trough. "Rat me if I know what to make of you! For a tramp you're—"

"Lord, Lord, we're all tramps!" said the gypsy, and plunged his face into the bucket of water.

From the road beyond the farmhouse came the laughter and song of children bearing garlands of flowers and green branches. The dairymaids, rus-

ting in clean dresses, each had a posy tucked into her bosom: new straw hats hung ready behind the kitchen door. A wagoner, seated upon the bench where shining milk pails were set to dry, was plaiting fresh ribbons to tie around his elbows for the Morris: and three lanky youths hung about the yard waiting a chance to present tight round nosegays of garden flowers, which they endeavored to conceal behind them; jealously scowling at one another; tongue-tied and shy whenever one of the maids tripped, smiling consciously, past the open door.

Before noon the village green was thronged with country-folk clad in their best for the most joyous holiday of all the year. On a seat that circled one of the giant oaks the Parson gossiped with half a dozen aged worthies, who, hand behind ear and stick between knees, were prepared to sit day-long and criticise their more agile neighbors.

Grandmothers ambled sedately between couples of toddling youngsters, followed by proud mothers carrying the very youngest. Children of all ages romped and shrieked, or crowded round a green booth to gaze in awe at Robin Hood and Maid Marian, and a fat jester struggling into his hobby-horse.

The Squire had had bowers of wattle hurdles and leafy branches erected on one side of the green, where the gray wall of the Manor grounds bounded the expanse of turf and here cakes and ale, cold meat and pastry were to be had for the asking.

A Maypole, gay with hoops and garlands of flowers, towered above everything, and at its foot an

upturned hogshead, covered with a scarlet cloth, was ready for the fiddler.

Farmer Butterwick, in green broadcloth and brass buttons that winked in the sun, shepherded his party from the farm: Mrs. Butterwick, a son and his wife, a daughter and her husband and four scampering children; the wagoners, the dairymaids, a herd boy, and the still dangling, nosegay-carrying beaux, who had not yet plucked up sufficient courage to advance with their offerings. Merodach and his borrowed fiddle, and Dolly with her basket, brought up the rear.

Young Carew, shaven but still shamefaced, refused to join them, saying he would follow later, when he could slip in among the crowd unobserved.

"Poor lad!" said Merodach as they set out. "He labors under the delusion that the whole of creation can look at nothing else. 'Tis but a malady of youth. 'Twill pass."

Dorothy laughed. "I suffered the complaint myself, years ago, at my first ball."

"Ah," returned Merodach with something vaguely resembling a bow. "But in your case 'twas true." He flung out his hand toward a magnificent bird that spread his tail from the wall of the Manor. "Look! Even the peacock is all eyes for you!"

"Merodach," said the girl gently, "don't spoil our friendship with empty compliments." She slid her hand into his. "I—I'm prodigious lonely, Merodach. I need a friend more than you can

know." Her voice died in her throat, she turned wet eyes away.

The gypsy said nothing but gripped her fingers, and hand in hand they followed the farmer to the foot of the Maypole where Squire Hazelhurst and his lady and a dozen guests awaited them.

"Morning, Squire," called Butterwick, touching his hat. "A merry May to 'ee, sir, an' many of 'em! I've brought 'ee a fiddler, Squire." He jerked a thumb in the direction of Merodach, who smiled and nodded a bare head.

"O la!" whispered one of the girls from the Manor. "Look, Lucy! An't he a handsome fellow!" Fans fluttered, dainty hats bobbed together as their wearers stood a-tiptoe to catch a glimpse of the gypsy; but the men of the party had eyes only for Dorothy.

"Sink me!" said Colin Carmichael, poisoning a quizzing glass. "A country beauty! A hedge-rose! Burn my soul!" And pressed nearer, staring.

Dorothy found herself the center of a laughing, ogling crowd of men, but this was nothing new. She backed against the wall of a booth, and ensconced behind her basket, held them off and had a retort for every sally.

Quick to take her measure, the gentlemen contented themselves with choosing ribbons to offer as fairings to the ladies. One or two farm lads bought up the rest, and Dorothy was soon left swinging an empty basket and watching rather

wistfully the impressive ceremony of crowning the Queen of May. A pretty, red-haired lass was encircled with a green garland; crowned with a wreath of primroses, solemnly embraced by the Squire and amid cheers and the waving of beribboned hats, escorted to her throne beneath the oak. Then lines formed for the first dance, in which, following the time-honored custom of the village, the Squire and his lady took part.

"*My Lady Cullen!*" shouted the Squire, bustling from group to group. "Longways for as many as will, but make it twelve couple or we'll be at it till dinner-time. A dozen couple. Butterwick, line 'em up! Come, Parson, you're dancing, Mrs. Butterwick lacks a partner. Hi, Doctor! No sneaking off to smoke, now. Find a maid, sir, find a maid! Now, Carmichael—Wallace—a dozen couple. This set full? No, ye want two. Lucy, my dear, bring your Philip. Are we ready? Strike up, fiddler! *My Lady Cullen!*"

Seizing his wife's hand the worthy Squire led his set, "*up a double and back, all that again, set and turn single—*" his face radiating smiles, his wig askew, his lace ruffles fluttering: the surliest curmudgeon could not have resisted his overflowing good-nature.

My Lady Cullen ending in bobs and bows, the Squire's party retired to the booth set apart for their use, and sat waving fans and kerchiefs, and declaring that it was prodigious hot for the time of year: watching with varying degrees of interest the

Morris men processing across the green, led by the prancing hobby-horse, Robin Hood winding his horn, and a lanky Maid Marian, a little sheepish in his girl's attire.

With a rhythmical sweep of white handkerchiefs and flutter of ribbons at waist and knee, the Morris men, solemn, yet expressing a restrained exhilaration, went through the figures of *Step Back*, the bells upon their legs ringing lustily in time to the stamp of feet and the swinging, inspiring music of the fiddle. The Squire sat intent, critical as only one can be who has had practical experience of this ancient form of art. *The Rose* followed: Farmer Butterwick's wagoner danced the *Princess Royal* jig; and then the Squire called them all into his booth to drink the inevitable healths. The King, God bless him! The Queen of May. The Squire, deafening cheers. Mrs. Hazelhurst and family, more cheers. The gentry from the Manor, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Merodach, sitting on his hogshead, mopped his face and smiled across at Dorothy, who presently made her way through the moving crowd and leaned against the Maypole, absently plucking at the strings of the violin.

"I didn't know you played, Merodach," said she.

For an instant he was off his guard. "Faith, I keep it dark. 'Tis considered monstrous vulgar. The flute's your only genteel instrument."

She looked up, recognizing that here spoke an equal. "Who are you, Merodach?"

He shrugged. "What's in a name? My soul's my own, were my father lord or lackey. Give me the fiddle, child, and get ye a partner. Here comes the Squire."

He came, nodding cheerily at Merodach, beckoning to Dorothy. "D'ye know *Gathering Peascods*, fiddler? Just for the youngers. Come, child, you must dance. My son'll jump at the chance. Robin—Robin, here's a partner for ye!"

A rosy-cheeked lad of eighteen ran up, offered Dorothy his wrist and led her off.

"Now then!" cried the Squire, waving his hat. "*Gathering Peascods!*"

A great circle of children ringed the Maypole, hand in hand, jumping with excitement. Here and there a stripling shot up above the smaller fry, or a long-legged girl stooped for the hands of two seven-year-olds. As the fiddle shrilled out the Squire retired, dreaming, and sat himself down to watch; and at this moment young Carew lounged along the sun-flecked road in search of Dorothy.

Up bounced the Squire to accost him. "Hi there, my man!"

Startled, Ralph stopped and stared, neglecting to touch his hat. A farm hand knocked it off for him.

"Dang'ee, cap Squire!" he bawled truculently.

"You're a stranger?" said the Squire, advancing. "You're welcome. We're merrymaking to-day. First of May, ye know. Must keep up old customs. Sit down, man, and—why—what's this? What's this?"

A girl left the Manor party and came toward them smiling, flushing, a dainty hand outstretched.

"O me!" cried she gayly. "'Tis Ralph Carew! Lud, how strange! We part in Paris to meet again in Hazelhurst. Sure, you've not been so ungallant as to forget me?"

Thunderstruck, poor Ralph stood staring, scarlet to the ears, fingering that absurd felt hat. "Miss Carmichael?" he stammered.

"Who else? But in Paris it was Julie, wasn't it? Fickle creature, you vowed you'd write, but no—never a line. Uncle, you must know Ralph Carew. You remember his uncle, Sir Julian. Dear old man! How does he, Ralph? I seem to know him so well, from all your talk of him."

Suppressing his astonishment with an effort, the Squire shook hands with this tatterdemalion and patted his niece upon the arm.

"Lud, Julie," said he. "Your friends crop up in unexpected quarters, on my soul! Carew, you're very welcome, if only for your uncle's sake. We were at school together, though he must ha' been years older than I. I owe him thanks for many a kindness to a homesick youngster, bullied out of his five wits. Hallo, the dance is over. Carew, I'll leave you to Julie's tender mercies! Excuse me." He bustled away and young Carew remained miserably gazing at the turf.

"What ails the man?" said Miss Carmichael, glancing demurely from beneath long lashes.

"Why—why, 'tis devilish distressing, meeting

you like this," floundered Ralph, conscious of her amusement.

"You're not glad to see me. *Hélas*, these ephemeral vows!"

"Gad, I don't mean that, Julie!" he cried. "But I—this dress—I'm not fit company—I—"

She screwed her hand into an imaginary spyglass and regarded him quizzically, to his intense discomfort.

"Lud, I find you improved, Ralph. You've grown. I protest you've quite a color. Dear heart, how the child blushes! La, what's a shabby coat? I dare swear you're doing this for a wager."

"I—I am," faltered Ralph. "'Tis secret. I'm—I'm vowed not to disclose—"

"How intriguing! Come, sit with me and recount all your desperate adventures. How long is't since we parted and you rushed off to pay your devoirs to Sir Julian? A month! And you've not writ to me. 'Twas monstrous cruel in you, sir, and I at the window each morn, languishing for a letter. Come, you may bring me a glass of cider and a cake—a large one, Ralph, with candied peel atop. And we'll sit here and I'll listen leniently to your apologies."

"O lud!" thought young Carew. "Here's another woman demanding apologies!" He pulled his hat over his eyes and brought refreshment, dropping beside Miss Carmichael's chair, his face afire, his ears tingling; unable to reply to her rallying; conscious that from a distance Mero-

Ralph was regarding him with amusement and Dorothy with surprise; hot with shame at the smothered titters from the ladies of the Manor, who behind painted fans whispered together and laughed maliciously.

Devoutly hoping that Dorothy would have the good sense to keep away, he turned his back upon the green and endeavored to answer Miss Carmichael's questions without implicating himself with Miss Forrest. The girl beside him was piqued but ready to listen to explanations, and he was telling her of his uncle's sudden death when the fiddle began again and squares formed for *Saint Martin's*.

Miss Carmichael sprang to her feet. "Dance with me, Ralph. I adore country dances, and on such turf! Uncle, Uncle! Have you a partner? Come face us." She caught Carew by the cuff and pulled him forward, and the wretched fellow found himself opposite Dorothy; Dorothy with set lips and dangerously cool eyes. He got through the dance somehow, tingling as she turned her shoulder to him in the honor; and led Miss Carmichael back to her seat.

"An't my uncle deliciously *sans façon*, dancing with that peddler girl?" said she, snapping open her fan and handing it to him to wield. "A pretty wench. The tenants adore him, and can you wonder? Shall you make such a squire when you come into your own, Ralph?"

He shrugged. "There's my cousin Valerius to

be reckoned with. He's heir. We've to prove his death 'fore I can inherit."

"His death?" shrieked Julie, horror-struck.

"Lud, yes. He's disappeared. Everything goes to him if he's alive. Ash Holt, the London house, everything!"

"Ash Holt is somewhere hereabout, isn't not?"

"Five miles or so from here, I suppose. 'Tis years since I was there."

"La, how I would love to see it!" exclaimed Miss Carmichael, clasping her hands. "We could ride over and picnic. Delicious! Uncle—Uncle! Mr. Carew has a house near. Elizabethan, you said, Ralph? I dote upon old houses. Can we ride over to-morrow and send a groom with dinner? It's occupied, Ralph?"

"There's a housekeeper, I believe," returned poor Carew, dazed with the young lady's impetuosity, sublimely blind to the fact that Julie was perfectly aware of his unhappiness and was endeavoring to punish him for his neglect of her. "But I tell you, Julie—'tis my cousin's place, I've no—"

"Oh, Sir Valerius won't know, and if he did he'd never be so churlish as to object. Uncle, you'll mount Ralph? Ladybird would be up to his weight."

"Just as you please, my dear," said the Squire absently, watching *The Phoenix* with the nearest approach to a frown that ever ruffled his benign forehead. "Gad, 'tis degenerating to a romp!"

Too bad—too bad! Shocking, Robin, shocking! Positively most distressing! Country dances an't a game of catch-as-catch-can, lad!"

"'Tis difficult to get round in time, on turf, sir," laughed the boy, rubbing damp temples. "What now, Julie?"

"Come be presented to Ralph Carew," she called. "He's to take us over to-morrow to Ash Holt Grange. Well then, if not to-morrow, next day! Lud, what a popinjay it is! We can send a groom for your baggage, sir. Harry, you'll ride with us? And Colin and Robin and Philip and Lucy. And my uncle, of course. We'll picnic in the park beneath the haunted oak. Who is it walks there, Ralph?"

Poor Carew muttered something inaudible and endeavored to edge away, but Miss Carmichael laid a compelling hand upon his arm. "Wait—you'll come stay at the Manor and we'll send for your clothes. Where did you say? An inn at—lud, sir! No excuses! My uncle will never forgive me if you refuse his hospitality. One might think from your 'havior that you wished to quarrel—you don't? Then be persuaded."

"I'll come when—after my baggage arrives," he stammered. "I'm not prepared—faith, Miss Carmichael—you must see that 'tis impossible for me to visit in these rags. Wait until the day after to-morrow, and I'll make the necessary arrangements. Gad, Julie, don't be unreasonable."

Miss Carmichael pouted. "Oh, very well, sir.

But I shall expect you o' Thursday, clothed and in your right mind!"

She gave him her hand to kiss; and he contrived to laugh and make his adieux, and slunk back to the Butterwick's barn, where sprawling on the straw he worried over the situation, revolving every possible expedient, rejecting one plan after another until the dusk melted into night and he lay staring into the darkness of the timbered roof, utterly miserable, unable to see a way out of the tangle into which his too susceptible heart had led him.

CHAPTER XX

YOUNG CAREW SEEKS ADVICE

THE merrymaking continued on the green with increasing intervals for refreshment, until twilight fell.

Robin Hood and Maid Marian danced and drank and ate until they could no more, but lay, replete and somnolent, in the lengthening shadows of the trees. Maid Marian, misliking his unaccustomed skirt, wriggled out of it and appeared in laced bodice, chip hat and breeches, to the huge delight of the children, who clamored for rides on the hobby-horse until the jester, who provided the legs of his steed, was thoroughly worn out.

The Queen of May, a little tired of lonely state upon her throne, cast off her garlands and came down to join in the dances, to the distraction of half a dozen young fellows who considered they held a monopoly on her hand.

Merodach and Dolly, side by side upon the turf, watched the foot races, the sack races, the young girls racing for a new smock. The Squire and the gentlemen of his party made up a purse for an impromptu wrestling match: young folk played *Drop Handkerchief*, and *Oats and Beans*; and an ancient in a round frock, pipe in one hand, mug in

t'other, leaned against the wall of a booth, shut his eyes, and sang folk songs; his immediate neighbors joining lustily in the refrains.

All day long the sun shone and the breeze kept one from growing too hot. The Squire, reveling in the customs of his forefathers, smiled largely upon the scene, forgot the curious incident of the young man in rags, and was completely happy.

But Dorothy did not forget. She sat silent, distraught, threading daisies into a chain, replying absently to Merodach's attempts at conversation; and thinking that she would be better alone for a while he excused himself, crossed to one of the booths and ate a belated dinner.

The girl wound her flower-chain about her neck, clasped her hands over her knees and sat brooding, unconscious of the romping children, deaf to the shouted encouragement of the ring that watched the wrestlers; and not until a flushed gallant dropped beside her did she look up.

"Fair maid," simpered Colin Carmichael, laying a white hand on his tambour vest. "Behold me at your—hic!—your feet, an' doocid pretty feet, I'll swear, in spite of your—ahem!—clogs!" He giggled; an engaging if rather foolish young man, in whom there seemed nothing to fear.

Dorothy thought it wise to fall in with his humor.

"Fair sir," said she. "Leave me, I would be alone."

"Ah, cruel one! You stab me with your doocid

pretty eyes!" He edged nearer, languishing. "Behold me, Colin Carmichael, at your doocid pretty feet!"

"Carmichael?" echoed Dorothy, roused.

"Carmichael. Colin, son of Robert the Devil. I'm a bit of a devil myself, an't I?"

"'Tis evident, sir," agreed Dorothy. "And the young lady in lilac silk? Is she your sister?"

"Julie? Gad, yes. Bless her soft heart. D'ye recognize the family likeness?"

"She's betrothed?" suggested the girl, ignoring an arm about her waist.

"Lud, what do I know! She's half a dozen gal-lants dangling. Her last flame is—hic!—Ralph C-carew, doocid good fellow but woundily ill dressed. However"—he squeezed nearer—"we'll none of him. What's Ralph Carew to us, or we to Ralph Carew? Phutt! less than nothing. I'll kiss you, sweet hedge-rose, and you'll forget Ralph C-carew an' all his works, so—"

Hot breath tainted with the fumes of wine smote upon her cheek. She scrambled to her feet, tripped, recovered, and was off apace, pursued by the impressionable Colin.

Such a chase was merely one of many a May Day frolic: none dreamed of spoiling sport, but laughed and cheered them forward with hunting cries and deep-throated guffaws. The flying gypsy girl and the galloping gallant caused much amusement; but Dorothy lost her head.

It would have been easy to submit to a kiss and

escape, if she had not begun to run. Once started, panic seized her and she dare not stop. Breathless, frightened, she raced across the green, caught sight of the fiddler emerging from the eating-booth, and with a gasping, "Merodach! Save me!" flung herself into his arms.

Taken utterly by surprise Merodach instinctively clutched her, kissed her, and became aware that they were the center of attraction.

"What the plague!" panted Colin Carmichael, catching at the Parson for support. "Wha—what did she call him? *Merodach?*"

"*Merodach?*" shouted the Squire, the Parson, Farmer Butterwick and the gentlemen from the Manor.

"Merodach? Gad burn my soul!"

"The Champion? Merodach? Rabbit me, what a wasted day!"

"Merodach? Good heaven, sirs, who can we match him with?"

"'Tis Merodach, fiddling for a parcel of clowns to dance! Oh, butter my wig!"

Circling Dorothy with one arm, Merodach found himself pounded upon the back, shaken by the hand, deafened with cheers, apologies, explanations. Had they known, these gentlemen vociferated, had they dreamed who he was they'd have been condemned 'fore they'd have allowed him to fiddle! A match! A match! Hal the wheelwright was a glutton for punishment, he'd be good for dozen rounds, at least. A match—a match!

Merodach smiled and shook his head. "I've a job on hand that bars fighting, sirs," said he, when the hubbub had somewhat subsided. "When I'm free, mebbe I might obleege ye." No amount of persuasion could move him. He picked up his fiddle and turned to the Squire. "Ye'll not be needing more music to-night, sir? Then we'll jog. My wife's tired."

"Here, wait a bit, Merodach," cried the Squire, suddenly diffident. "'Tis our custom to give the fiddler tuppence a head, but demme, we can hardly offer you that. If you'll accept—"

"Thank'ee, Squire. Tuppence a head let it be. I've done no more for you than old Sam would."

The Squire beamed. Here was a man after his own heart. He whipped off his Kevenhuller and held it out.

"Tuppence a head, lads, for the fiddler. Come, Carmichael—you've had your money's worth! Robin! Doctor, where's yours? Oh, no change given. Ye'll get no change from Merodach! Tuppence a head. Good night to you, Mrs. Butterwick, ma-am. I shall call to-morrow to take a look at that ailing ewe. Good night, Tom. Keep away from the tavern, you rascal, you've had all you can carry. Good night, Betsy. Is it three times you've been church-called? Then come up to the Manor and bring your Harry, and my wife'll see what she can find for ye. Good night! Good night!"

Coppers clanked into the hat as the country folk

trailed past with bobs and pulled forelocks: until the Squire turned and emptied his load upon the ale-slopped table behind him.

"You'll not be able to carry this," said he, "I'll give you gold."

"Thank'ee, Squire. I'll take a crown, and will ye send the rest on't to old Sam? He'll be laid up a while." Merodach looked down into the kindly blue eyes beneath their scanty brows, and smiled. "This'd be a sad loss to old Sam, sir. And I've—plenty. Good night, and good-by. We'll be off again to-morrow."

The Squire shook hands, nodded to Dorothy, abruptly turned on his heel and shovelled the coppers into his capacious pockets. "Good-by," said he gruffly. "You're a damned fine fellow, Merodach. If ever I can do aught for you—there, be off wi' ye!"

The chestnut bordered road was full of slowly sauntering couples, arm in arm, hand in hand: children lagged wearily behind their mothers: fathers carried sleepy toddlers: old folk hobbled bedward, silent, dim-eyed, remembering long-past May Days when they too had wandered home by way of Owl Copse and the kissing gate.

Merodach slid an arm about Dorothy's waist and sauntered with the rest, thrilled by the consciousness that the girl leaned against him. They said nothing, until pausing at the Butterwick's gate a passing couple called, "Good night!"

"Good night!" returned Merodach, and waited, swinging back the green wicket as Dorothy passed him.

A deep arch of yew blotted out the stars, and stumbling in the darkness the girl caught at Merodach's shoulder.

In an instant he had her in his arms.

Breathless, tingling from head to foot, Dorothy lay dazed, stunned by the sudden passion of his embrace. Beside the gypsy's kisses, young Carew's were the mere awkward pecks of a diffident lad. She was too utterly overwhelmed to repulse him and remained motionless, until as suddenly as he had taken her, he let her go.

"Gad!" he whispered, panting a little. "I'm a fool—I—faith, child, I couldn't help it. Forgive me—"

She could not have spoken to save her life: she passed him, a hand to her burning face, and disappeared round the corner of the house. When after a moment he followed, she was not to be seen.

Young Carew came yawning from the barn and perched upon the pump trough, kicking his heels.

"Hallo," said he. "A word with you, Merodach. I'm in the devil of a hole."

For once his egotism was a blessing.

The gypsy sat down upon a hen-coop, thankful that the twilight hid his face, and that, as usual, Mr. Carew was solely concerned with himself.

"At your service, sir," says he, breathing deep

to check his galloping heart. Heavens! he had kissed her and she was not angry. She had lain passive, unresisting, almost he could have sworn she responded—her lips—

"I'm in the deuce of a mess!" moaned young Carew.

"Are ye, sir? What's the trouble? From all I saw of you down on the green you seemed to be making the most of your time!" Merodach laughed.

"Oh, devil take the women!" cried Carew. "They're for ever at me. I seem to draw 'em as a honey-pot draws wasps. 'Tis my cursed attractiveness, Merodach. You can thank your stars you an't alluring!"

"O lud, I do—I do!" said the gypsy solemnly. "Who's after ye now, sir? Was it the young 'oman in the laylock gown? A neat figure, on my soul!"

"Faith, I should name no names, being as I hope a gentleman. But deuce take it, I'm at my wits' end, and 'tis not as though you were—that is—demme, 'tis Miss Carmichael's head over ears in love with me. I met her in Paris, and we—we saw a good deal of each other, but I swear I never gave her the least encouragement—I never offered myself! And now she chooses to conduct as if we were affianced—upbraids me for not having written—presents me to her uncle with all the airs of a wife—good gad, Merodach! What am I to do?"

"Mr. Carmichael'll be her brother?" suggested Merodach, chewing a grass straw to keep his lips from twitching to a smile.

"Lud, yes. But what's he—?"

"A woundily fine swordsman, so I've heard."

"Demme, d'ye think he'll call me out?" quavered poor Ralph.

"What other course has he, if ye jilt Miss?"

"But I tell you we're not betrothed!"

"She'll say ye are, and he'll believe her." Merodach pushed his fingers through his thick hair. "Lord, Lord! what a plague is love!" he moralized, shaking with suppressed merriment. From his seat upon the empty hen-coop he could see the square window of the loft where Dorothy slept above the cow-house. In the gloom a golden head shone mistily like a full moon behind thin cloud. She could not move without betraying her presence to young Carew, and it was certain that she could hear every word.

"Well?" pleaded Ralph. "What d'ye think? What would you do?"

"Ecod, I've ne'er been plighted to two females at once."

"I tell you I'm not! I—"

"You've promised to wed Miss Forrest?"

"Gad, yes. I said I would, spite of everything."

"Did she accept of ye, sir?"

"Accept? Demme, wouldn't she jump at the chance? Coming from—"

"Well, but did she?" persisted the gypsy. "Look'ee, Mr. Carew, this is a serious affair."

"Oh, an't I aware of that?"

"Well, see now. Here's you—here's the two young ladies. You're plighted to one and t'other claims ye. Ergo, you'll have to break with one or t'other, this not being Turkey."

"Oh, od rot ye for a fool!" cried the lad, his voice catching in a sob. "Of course I shall! The question is, which one?"

"D'ye love 'em both, sir?" pondered the gypsy.

"O Lord! I'm damned if I love either! I wish 'em at Jericho—scheming hussies! I'm sick o' women—I wish I were dead! I wish—"

"O come, pluck up heart, sir! Things are never as bad as they might be."

"I'm demmed if I can see how they could well be worse!"

"While there's life there's hope," said Merodach. "If I were you, sir, I'd toss."

"*W-what?*"

"Toss, sir. Let fate decide. Spin a coin. Heads, Miss Carmichael gets ye. Tails, Miss—"

"Look ye, my man. I've not sunk quite so low as that!" declared Carew, sliding from his perch and standing rigid.

"Oh, no offense," returned Merodach cheerfully. "You asked my advice, sir. What I says is—let fate decide. If you object, well"—he shrugged—"ye'll ha' to wriggle out o' the mess another way."

"Lud, what odious expressions you do use, to be sure!" Carew turned, dug his hands into his pockets and began to ramp to and fro in the restricted space between the hen-coop and the cow-house wall, unable to go farther without falling over Merodach's long legs.

"If I can be of service ye can count on me," said Merodach heartily.

"Thank'ee. I think not. But gad! I'd forgot. Miss Carmichael's planned a picnic. I've had to permit her to send a groom to the Goat and Compasses for my baggage: he'll be back to-morrow night and then I shall be constrained to stay at the Manor a day or two and ride to Ash Holt Grange o' Thursday, and I—"

"That'll be Sir Valerius Carew's country place, now his uncle's dead?"

"To be sure. I want to warn the servants to open the house and light fires and prepare a meal. Er—being in a way—host—I feel it my duty to arrange for the comfort of my guests, d'ye see?"

"Quite so, sir," agreed Merodach. "No news of the missing heir, sir?"

"None."

"Warrant still out, sir?"

"Yes, of course."

Merodach rose slowly to his lithe height. "Well, to obleege ye, Mr. Carew, I'll go to Ash Holt Grange and tell 'em you're coming. 'Tis but a couple o' mile out of our road."

"Your road?"

"To Winterbourne, sir. Miss Forrest's eager to be at her cousin's."

"Why, I'd thought she'd wait for me," said young Carew. "Mrs. Butterwick'd let you stay on here another day or two. I've no doubt you could make yourself useful. You can't take Miss Forrest on alone."

"She'd be as safe with me as with you!" retorted Merodach heatedly.

"I tell you I'll not have it!"

"And what would Miss Carmichael say to that?"

"Oh, damn Miss Carmichael!" exclaimed Ralph bitterly. "Here we are back at the same point after all this discussion."

"'Tis the way of discussions, sir. Like toadstools, they grow in circles and 'tis waste o' time to pick 'em. Best sleep on it, sir. I'll start for Ash Holt bright an' early, so ye can set your heart at rest on that count. I'll arrange for a warm reception, never fear!"

Young Carew stared, concluded that the fellow meant well, and lounged dejectedly toward the barn. "I'll give you my commands in the morning," said he over his shoulder.

Merodach waited until he was out of sight and threw a pebble into the loft.

A pale face lifted above the window-sill.

"You heard, child?"

"I—I couldn't help but hear. Why didn't you take him away?"

"Trust me, 'tis all for the best. To-morrow,

agree to everything I suggest. I have a plan. There's a way out o' this coil, if you'll follow me."

She nodded, choking back her tears, gazing down at him from the dusty darkness of the haymow. "I promise. Good night."

"Good night." Merodach hesitated, kicking at a stray turnip.

"You want to tell me—now?" breathed Miss Forrest, leaning out.

"I—gad, no, child. Wait until to-morrow." He strode rapidly away; but the girl remained at the window, her cheek against the gray, weathered oak of the frame, her lips faintly smiling.

"Until to-morrow?" said she, and caught her breath in a sigh. "Merodach, I think you've told me—already."

CHAPTER XXI

THE ROAD TO ASH HOLT

WITH the flat feeling that inevitably follows festivity, the village of Hazelhurst set about its tasks next morning. Rain had fallen during the night and the roads were slippery with mud: garlands tossed aside and forgotten lay withering in odd corners: the very Maypole wore a dejected air, as though it were unwilling to stand neglected for another year.

The wattle bowers were being carried away as Merodach and Dorothy crossed the green, and a couple of carters nodded and stared after them, pausing in their work of loading the hurdles on to a wagon.

"Merodach," grunted one.

"Ay," responded the other.

"Squire made a terrible gurt fuss over him, surely. What's he done?" queried the boy at the horse's head.

"Done? Lumme, not to know Merodach!"

"Nubbody knowed him till his wife squealed out his name," retorted the lad, nettled.

"What I mean is, heard on him. He be a larmentable sprackish fighter, Merodach. Come up on top, as it were, all on a sudden like. Never heard tell on him one day, an' nexdy 'twere all over

the parish. Doctor were norating over it to Mus Pagden, as how Merodach beat his trainer Jack Broughton an' adunnamany other champions within a month. That were a year ago, mebbe. Then, look'ee, what's he do but disappear, an' naun to show where he'd gone. Then, ecod, up he pops somewheres, wins a match, an' disappears agen, like to a Punch an' Judy show. Fegs! he's a fair winner! We can count oursel's in luck to ha' set eyes on him. 'Tain't many as can say that!"

"Why, don't he show to every one?" said the lad in a scared whisper.

"Show?"

"Ay. Mebbe he's a farisee."

The carters stared at one another. "What the rabbits! Mebbe he is!" said they.

Silent with a new shyness, Dorothy followed the gypsy beneath the dripping oaks to a by-lane, winding capriciously through thickets of hazel and birch copses to a stretch of heathery common and so to the forest that clothes the country-side about Ash Holt.

She could not have analyzed her feelings: a vague unrest; a longing to know beyond all possible doubt; a dread that he would speak; a dread that he would not; wonder at herself, and bubbling laughter when she thought of poor Carew—all these and a dozen other emotions rioted within her as she trudged ankle-deep in wet leaves and sparkling grass, carrying her bundle on her hip.

It is to be assumed that Merodach was in much the same state of ferment. He strode ahead whis-

ting spasmodically; twirling a ground ash; pausing to watch the antics of a squirrel or a pair of bickering jays. From time to time he turned to glance at the girl, and went on without a word; until as the forest closed about them he came to a sudden halt and stood, breathing quickly, staring down at her.

The bundle dropped from Dorothy's fingers as their eyes met, the hot blood surged into her face beneath his glance. He stepped nearer and she did not move, but like a frightened bird remained motionless, palpitating.

He said nothing, but took her; and the world swam about them in a dizzy silence.

When after an eternity she opened her eyes there was nothing to be seen but brown cheek and ruffled black hair.

"Merodach!" she murmured, sighing in vast content, and slid both arms about his neck.

After another eternity she looked up again; and held him off a little; and tried to laugh and sobbed instead:

"Merodach—"

"Child!" he whispered shakily. "You're crying!"

"I'm not—I am! Mayn't I cry for joy? O lud, Merodach—I'm not made of wood!"

"Faith, no, dear heart." He touched her tenderly. "You're all sweet curves. Did I crush you? I'm mad, I think."

"We're both mad, hopelessly lunatic. And I—I like it—"

Whereupon there was no more to be said.

They went on after a time, very close together.

"You called me 'wife' last night," she reminded him shyly.

"I did! 'Twas shameless in me, but I wanted to hear how it sounded. Wife! A tinker's wife, as Mr. Carew put it."

"Ah, poor Ralph!"

"O lud, he'll survive it. The wretched youth's half crazed with terror. 'Apollo flies and Daphne holds the chase.' Miss Carmichael will teach him his manage. Look, here's a throne for you, Queen of May. They should have crowned you yesterday, instead of that little red-head!"

"She was pretty," said Dorothy, pausing beside the fallen trunk of a beech. "La, this tree's soaking."

"It won't soak through my breeches," said he, slipping the pack from his back. "Come!"

They lingered there, still wrapped up in the mysterious wonder of each other; still groping in a world that was a little unreal, insecure, liable to melt at a breath, as the land of dream melts upon awakening into the stable, rather dreary world of every day.

The sun broke through rapidly thinning clouds and struck down into the heart of the green woodland, turning every raindrop to a twinkling jewel; shining through translucent beech leaves; caught and imprisoned in Dorothy's tumbled hair.

Wood sorrel, growing in the rotting stump of the beech, expanded in the warmth, opening its frail trefoil leaves to the sun. The girl leaned forward to pluck a bit and nibbled it, gazing dim-eyed at nothing.

Merodach looked at her.

"D'you think you can stand it?" he asked at length, touching her slim hands.

"W-what?"

"Tramping?"

"I can try," said she. "But later on, when winter comes, it would be nice to have a little house."

"Nice? Inadequate woman! 'Twould be elysium. But—"

"Then perhaps one of those black tents, or a caravan," pondered Dorothy. "Anywhere—"

"Well?" he teased her as she faltered.

"Anywhere—with you!" She relaxed, obeying the pressure of his arm. "I'm a headlong creature, an't I? Vastly imprudent! I eloped with Mr. Carew the second—the third time ever I saw him."

"My parents were as headlong," he said. "My father was but two-and-twenty, traveling with his tutor, when at a carnival in Madrid he picked up a rose intended for another man. It had a message on a strip of paper round the stem. He gave his tutor the slip, followed the girl who had thrown the flower, discovered where she lived and kept the tryst that night. They were wed next day."

"La," sighed Dorothy. "How deliciously romantic!"

Merodach grinned. "The tutor didn't find it so! He was half out of his mind, and fled back to England and took a living in the wilds of Yorkshire to escape my grandad's wrath. He'd never have got another pupil, after losing one in that fashion!"

"And what of your parents?"

"Oh, they wandered about Spain. My mother hid herself from pursuit. There was a wealthy old rake after her, whom she loathed, and 'twas to escape marriage with him that she flung a rose to a mask at the carnival. They lived as gypsies live—wind-free. I was born in a ditch, and please God I'll die in one, under the stars!"

Instinctively her arms tightened about his neck. "I don't want to speak of death," she whispered, and hid her face. "Tell me of your mother."

Merodach shook his head. "Words are poor things. She was the merriest creature. I've seen her fall into a stream and come up drenched, and crawl to land and sit laughing, wringing the water from her clothes. If it rained, she laughed. If it shone, she laughed. If the wind tore at her she went frantic with delight. But—she died when I was twelve. After that my father and I wandered half over Europe—the sunny half. I know France, Spain, Italy, better than many of the natives who lived out their days in one village. Then my father died, and wandering seemed to

lose its charm, and I came home to England—lonely—” He stopped, frowning a little.

“And then, beloved?” urged the girl, and smoothed out the wrinkle between his eyes with a finger-tip.

“The rest of the story must wait,” he said decisively. “You shall know it all, one day. We must on to Ash Holt, and remember, you’ve promised to agree to everything I suggest.”

She nodded. “I promised.”

“Even if it seems churlish in me, even if you can’t understand?”

“I promise.”

“You’ll trust me?”

Her eyes filled with sudden tears. “I’ll try to—I’ll do as you say. But don’t—don’t make it too hard for me, Merodach.”

He bent his head to kiss her.

They ate of the food Mrs. Butterwick had given them, drank from a chalk stream and wandered on; until the red-brown walls of Ash Holt Grange appeared, and Merodach halted, a delaying hand upon her arm.

“Here we part. Faith, child, only for half an hour. I must go tell the servants of the impending descent of Ralph and his guests. There’s a summer-house somewhere near, where you can wait.”

“You know the place?” cried she, bewildered.

“I have been here before. The butler’s an old friend of mine.” He lifted her to the top of the

wall, threw the bundles over and climbed after, dropping to mossed turf beneath a great chestnut, alight with its candles of spiked bloom.

Radiant, laughing, she slid out of his arms, and he led her across the park to a thatched arbor on the borders of a pool.

Here he left her, and went through rose garden and pleached alley to the kitchen gardens, and so to the stable-yard where, ramping behind bars, a dozen couple of hounds belled a welcome, sterns waving, brown eyes wistful for caresses.

"Now then!" shouted a groom, emerging from the coach-house, cloth in one hand, a bridle half polished dangling from the other. "Now then, take yerself out o' this!"

"Is Mr. Marsh within?" asked Merodach.

"What's that to you?"

"Go tell him a gypsy wants to see him."

"I'll be shot if I do!" cried the lad, and swung about as a man came out of the back porch and stood blinking in the sunshine.

"What's all this?" said he. "Ecod, I've been looking for you. Come your ways in. Mike, go trot into the harness room, my lad, an' get the rust off that bridle, 'less you want your nose rubbed on't! 'Tis in a shockin' state!"

Dumb with disgust, the young groom stared at the speckless bridle, scratched his head, stared at the gypsy, stared at the butler, and retired, growling.

Merodach followed the old fellow into the buttery.

"Well, Marsh," said he, "how fares it with you? Sit down, man, and let me have all the news."

Coughing apologetically, Marsh subsided on to a bench, and told his tale.

This one was dismissed for laziness; this one was put into his place. One of the maids had lately wed a carter. Such and such a horse was lame. These fields were down for pasture, these were sown. So many lambs; so many pups; five young calves and half a hundred chicks and ducklings.

"Everything flourishes?" said Merodach comfortably. "'Tis very well. Mr. Ralph sent me to warn you that 'tis his intent to come to-morrow with ten or a dozen guests. Rooms are to be opened, fires lit, meals prepared. He wishes to impress a certain young lady with his—er—heritage. Gad, Joseph, you'll do yourself a hurt if you laugh so!"

"Heritage? Damme!" The butler wiped merry eyes, choking, spluttering, lying back against the wall to hold his sides.

Merodach prodded him with an impressive forefinger.

"You'll treat Mr. Ralph as though he were already your master. Understand that Mr. Valerius still hides. Mr. Ralph confidently expects never to see him more, and will conduct according. Why—what's that?"

A bell rang somewhere in the house above them. The butler's face regained its normal serenity.

"Ecod," said he. "I'd forgot. 'Tis a Mr. Cavanagh come a-seeking ye. It seems he has news, though what it is I can't discover. He arrived last night, all of a lather with impatience, and could hardly wait till I'd got into my breeches to let him in. Had you come, had I heard from you, had I this and had I t'other, until blest if I knew whether I stood on my head or my heels. A most hurryful gent, on my soul!"

"Let be," said the gypsy, rising. "I'll go to him. Which room, Joseph?"

"The oak parlor, sir," responded Marsh. "Will ye dine?"

"Faith, yes. Later, when I've seen Cavanagh." Merodach swung off to the oak parlor, and entering, found the Irishman at ease, his chair tilted on to its back legs, his feet propped against the chimney-breast, basking in the warmth of a wood fire with his wig upon the table.

"Oh," says he without looking round. "And hasn't that lazy rascal Merodach arrived yet, Marsh?"

"Apparently," returned Merodach, coming forward, utterly unprepared for the wild yell with which Cavanagh leapt to his feet. The chair crashed over backward, but Merodach caught it before it reached the floor.

"Good ged—damned neat!" cried Larry, tugging at something in his coat pocket. "What d'ye think?"

Carew's cleared!" He slapped a folded paper on to the table and laughed triumphantly.

Merodach shot a glance at him, bent forward and picked up the document. "Janet Robinson, her mark?" said he, staring at the signature. "What the deuce is this?"

"Read!" cried Cavanagh, capering. "Read!"

CHAPTER XXII

ASH HOLT GRANGE

ALONE in the thatched arbor Dorothy waited, watching swallows skimming the surface of the pond, flycatchers feeding as they hovered, blue tits building in a flowery bush, thrushes patrolling a patch of turf for the unwary worm. Relaxing, she curled up on the seat, laid her head on her bundle and drifted into slumber, dreaming that she was the Princess Beauty and that Merodach was the Beast, imploring her to wed him. A shadow fell across the doorway, and she awoke to find Larry Cavanagh bending over her.

"Merodach sent me," said he. "I'm to be taken' ye up to the house."

Amazed, she stared at him.

"You find it strange to see me here?" he added, and stooped to lift the baggage.

"I—yes, I hardly expected it." She rose, smiling a little uncertainly. "Merodach—?"

"Faith, Merodach's had news that'll keep him busy for a day or two. The butler and his wife and myself will be lookin' after ye. This way—

He led her through the gardens; along the pleasance, divided into square closes where the pink

of apple blossoms shone above the clipped yew hedges; up to the terraced walk, gay with nodding daffodils and early gillyflowers; and so to the great porch, where Marsh and the gray-haired woman waited at the head of the steps to welcome her.

"Miss Forrest'll be wishful to see her room," suggested Cavanagh, depositing his load upon a seat in the hall. "Follow Mrs. Marsh, me dear. Sure, 'tis a big house, but if ye get lost ye can yell!"

The butler took her valise, Mrs. Marsh, scandalized but calm, carried the bundles; and the girl moved as in a dream up the wide oak staircase with its carved balustrade and leisurely, shallow steps, to the branching gallery above.

"The west wing, ma'am," says Mrs. Marsh, turning down a corridor. "Here Sir Julian would have lodged his lady, had he married. 'Tis years since he was here, preferring town, ma'am, and the Bath. Mr. Valerius, being heir, had the run of the place. He uses these rooms when he's here, which ain't often, ma'am, an' when he does come he's that solitary he might a'most as well be an eremite, shutting hisself up an' seeing no one but Marsh. They say he hates all women since his mother died. No, she were never here, ma'am. Old Sir Antony refused to meet her, and Mr. Raymond being a proud man an' desp'rate hot-blooded, *he* refused to come without her. And so his father never saw him again, ma'am. Not since he married." She opened a door and stepped aside for Dorothy to enter. "The boudoir, ma'am. The bedchamber lies yonder. I

trust you'll be comfortable, ma'am. There's the bell rope. I'll bring some bow-pots. Mebbe ye'll like to fill 'em with flowers yourself?"

"Yes, thank you," murmured Dorothy, lost in wonder, recognizing Merodach's thought behind the housekeeper's words.

Alone in the big room she wandered from hearth to window, from window to settee, her eyes roving for some token, some message.

She found nothing in the boudoir, but in the bedroom a tiny bunch of sweet violets, still wet with rain, lay on her dressing-table. She set them in water and unpacked, shaking out her creased clothing, smoothing muslins, hanging a flowered gown before the fire.

An hour later, Mr. Cavanagh, feigning to read in the hall, became aware that a lady descended; and rose, book in hand, bowing to the skins that strewed the polished floor.

"Good ged," he declared, laughing. "I protest, ma'am, I didn't know you!"

Dorothy smiled and spread her skirts, preening herself, demurely content to be clad daintily once more. "There was no need to go in rags, was there? Merodach—wouldn't mind?"

"Mind? Good ged, not if he could see you!"

"And have you permission to show me the house and gardens?"

"The whole blessed Ark-load!"

"Ark?"

"Oh, 'tis a farm we inhabit, me dear! Cows,

sheep, ducks, geese, foxhounds, horses, dogs—well now, an' will ye look at that?"

A grave setter walked sedately in, gazed inquiringly from Cavanagh to Dorothy, and slowly waved a plummy flag.

"Dear boy!" said she, holding out her hand.

He came, sniffed, regarded her with liquid eyes and laid his beautiful head upon her knee. Dorothy took his face between her hands, smoothed the silky hair, kissed him, and from that moment he never left her. While they dined he lay beside her chair: when they walked he paced at her side, pausing tolerantly to give her time to admire the broods of chickens; the lambs in the flowery orchard; the foxhounds, indignant and jealous, pawing at their bars.

She seemed content to wander about the gardens with Cavanagh, and if she ached to ask a thousand questions, she did not show it.

The Irishman was evidently laboring under some concealed emotion. At times he laughed for no apparent reason. At times he gave absurd replies to her most innocent remarks, and when she looked amazed, confessed that he did not know what he had said.

At ten she took her candle, went above-stairs, followed by the setter, and coming into her boudoir beheld Merodach, cross-legged before the hearth.

"You?" she cried. "They told me you had gone!"

"They believed it," he said, fondling the ecstatic

dog. "Down, Ranger, down! Mrs. Marsh saw to your comfort, child?"

She made a little gesture toward the glowing fire, the flowers that stood in bowls about the place; and smiled.

"I came back because I remembered that you'd vowed not to sleep in a house until you reached Winterbourne." He put the leaping setter aside and went to Dorothy. "Vows, even foolish vows, are not to be lightly broke, sweetheart." He bent to kiss her fingers as she hesitated. "Remember, you promised."

"I promised. What am I to do?" she said simply.

"Go dress in your gypsy things, and bring a shawl and a blanket from your bed."

She went obediently as a child; returned, and he led her from the boudoir to a tiny chamber in the wall, opening on a stair: the night closed, cool and fresh about them as they came out into the gardens, Ranger close at their heels.

"I've made a nest for you," said Merodach presently, coming to a halt in one of the square closes of the ancient pleasance, where walled about with thick yew hedges a lawn lay shadowed by a gnarled apple tree. He knelt to arrange a bed of dried fern, covered with a couple of carriage rugs.

"Ranger'll stay with you," he added, tucking her in.

She looked up. "And you?"

"I shall be—within call."

"I had rather you were—within reach," she whispered.

"Had you? Are you nervous? You've slept out before."

"Only once, and then—you were on the other side o' the fire," she reminded him, and slid her hands behind his head to draw it lower. "The night's so—so very big, Merodach."

Silent, awed by her faith in him, he fetched his bed from the next close and settled down so that at arm's length their hands could touch.

Above them the stars shone pale in the deeps of the sky. A nightingale, shyly, as though he knew the time was not yet come, was trying one note after another, practicing the love song he would sing as May blossomed into June.

Ranger scratched loose some fern, circled twice, curled up, and slept between them until morning.

CHAPTER XXIII

"T'OTHER DEAR CHARMER"

MRS. MARSH, appearing with a tray of chocolate and buttered rolls, found Dorothy flushed and dewy-eyed, huddling into her cold bed. She drew the curtains, remarking that it had been a fine night.

Dorothy supposed so.

"Mr. Ralph is to ride over with a party," said the housekeeper, letting spring sunshine flood the room. "But Marsh'll not show 'em this wing. If you keep this side o' the house, ma'am, you'll not be disturbed."

Sipping hot chocolate, Dorothy nodded, wondering what Mrs. Marsh thought of her presence there.

"Marsh has his orders," said the old woman, folding her hands beneath her elbows and contemplating Dorothy from the foot of the bed. "Dear knows what they be, he's as mum as a tadpole! But being Mr. Raymond's body-servant afore Mr. Valerius were born, an' after he grew up, *his* man, 'tis but natural he should cling to the family. We were wed late in life, ma'am. We've no children, so I mother Joseph. He's nought but a child—some men never do grow up—an' a child with a secret, well, there's no holding 'em!"

"A secret?" echoed Dorothy, not liking to snub the good woman, and yet fearful of prying. "Has he a secret?"

"La, yes, ma'am. For years an' years he's been a-hidin' something, ever since Mr. Valerius come home from furren parts. Dear knows what it is, an' I can't find out. It gets on my nerves a bit, ma'am, but I don't complain. Marsh is a good husband, as husbands go. And I thank heaven there ain't no one to be jealous of!"

The idea of suspecting Marsh guilty of even the mildest flirtation was too much for Miss Forrest, and she collapsed gurgling in the depths of her pillows.

Resigned to the eccentricities of quality, Mrs. Marsh collected the chocolate service and padded out. Dorothy lingered over a luxurious toilet: it was a change to use fine towels and dainty china after kneeling on the damp turf beside a brook.

Toward noon a cavalcade appeared, tittuping along the chestnut drive: young Carew, debonair, clad in his best and mounted on the Squire's pet hunter, Ladybird: Miss Carmichael, swaying on her mare like a titmouse on a twig: the Squire, jogging on his piebald, Marigold; Robin, and Lucy Hazelhurst attended by three adoring gallants.

They trotted up and dismounted at the porch where Marsh awaited them, and a stable-lad came forward to take the horses.

"Ah, Marsh," says Ralph, handing Miss Car-

michael up the steps. "How are ye? Wife and family well? We must have a talk before I leave, and I'll cast a glance over your books."

"Thank ye, Mr. Ralph," returned the old servant sedately. "Will you dine now, or see the house first?"

Ralph consulted Miss Carmichael.

"Oh, the gardens!" cried she. "Let's explore the gardens. 'Tis too early yet for dinner, and we can see the house later."

"Very good, sir," said Marsh, and hurried indoors.

The Squire watched in some disgust as Carew and the other young men vanished down the terrace in the wake of fluttering habits: and with a bridle in each hand, led his favorites to the stable-yard, discoursing meanwhile on the heinous practice of leaving the care of one's horse to hirelings.

Following with his dapplegray and Lucy's roan, Robin listened respectfully, although he knew the little homily by heart.

"One day your life may depend upon your steed," cries the Squire, unsaddling briskly. "(Boy, get me a handful of hay. Steady, Marigold, you demmed kitten!) If you an't able to call your horse to hand—(whoa, there!)—to hand, I say, and mount, d'ye see, Robin? gad, you may be left wounded on the field—"

"And lose the fox, sir," added the boy mischievously.

"Fox? Demme, sir, the field of battle! Who's talking of hunting? Now train your animal to

stand, to answer to his name—(hold up, Marigold, what the devil ails the beast?)—and where, I say, where are you—er—there you are!"

"There indeed, sir!" agreed Robin dutifully.

They saw their horses watered and fed, and satisfied that they were comfortable, wandered from the stable to kennels and so on to the gardens; where they discovered Lucy enthroned upon a seat, miraculously contriving to keep her three adorers in amiable converse with each other.

"Hallo?" said her father, coming up. "Where's Julie?"

"La, sir. Mr. Carew carried her off to see a fish pond, I believe."

"Sacred to the memory of his youth," added Colin.

"He fished?" said the Squire, interested at once.

"Lud, no, sir! He fell in."

Miss Hazelhurst rose and gathered up her trailing habit. "Mr. Carmichael, have you my whip? My gloves? Oh, Mr. Wallace has them. Shall we walk? There are buds in the rose garden as big as filberts, father. Come see."

Strolling down the shady pleasance young Carew had leisure to observe Miss Carmichael's ear; the curls that escaped from beneath her beaver; and the slim neck, rising white above her laced cravat. She resolutely kept her shoulder to him.

"Lud, I believe you've not forgiven me yet, Julie," said he, aggrieved.

"For which fault, sir? For neglecting me shame-

lessly? For not writing? Or for refusing to disclose the reason of your intriguing pilgrimage in rags?"

"I've explained that was a secret," expostulated Ralph. "Julie, don't spoil my day by being cruel."

"'Tis news that cruelty of mine can hurt you, sir!"

"I'm devilish miserable!" said he, and in truth he thought he was.

She turned large eyes upon him and laid her hand on his sleeve. "Poor lad, did I plague you? Well, for this one day, I'll be kind, nay more! I'll be indiscreet. You shall imagine me your wife, and show me all our domain. We are but just home from our honeymoon, Ralph, and I—lud, sir! Don't impose on my generosity! I gave you my hand!"

He took her waist. "If you'll wed me, Julie, I swear I'll—"

"O la, sir, we are wed—a full month!"

"Gad, I'm in earnest!"

She pouted. "You ask too much, i'faith. I give you a day and you demand a life-time. Lud, sir, can't you play?"

"No! I'm damned if I will!"

"Then if you won't, baby, go sulk by yourself!" She laughed and fled, impeded by her habit, intending him to overtake her.

He caught her just within the entrance to an apple-shaded close: caught her, kissed her, and became aware of Miss Forrest, wide-eyed upon a heap of dead fern.

She rose, outraged dignity personified; a book of verse in one hand, the other restraining a growling setter.

"Ralph!" said she, coached to her part by Mero-dach before they parted in the dawn.

"Good gad—Dolly!" gasped young Carew, and dropped Miss Carmichael as she had been a hot coal.

"Explain your conduct, sir," says Miss Forrest, biting twitching lips.

"*'Dolly'?*" cried Miss Carmichael in the same breath. "What's this, Ralph? 'Tis the peddler wench!"

Between the cross-fire of their eyes poor Carew stood stammering; scarlet to the ears; leaving a dozen sentences half spoken; wishing the green earth would yawn and swallow him up.

"Lud, the creature's stricken dumb," said Miss Carmichael, when at length he fell silent and turned to Dorothy. "Perhaps you'll be good enough to enlighten me, ma'am?"

"With pleasure, ma'am," replied Miss Forrest. "Mr. Carew eloped with me less than a week ago, but meeting with you at Hazelhurst he sends me on here to await his leisure." Her cool voice carried conviction to the flaming Julie.

"Are you wed, ma'am?" she asked, utterly ignoring the miserable Ralph.

"No, ma'am. Mr. Carew promised to carry me to Sussex, and the wedding was to take place from my cousin's, Jillian Tyrell of Winterbourne Chase. You may have heard of her."

"Tyrell? I thought you—"

"O la, 'twas but a disguise," said Dorothy, shrugging.

Miss Carmichael looked at Carew, but there was no need of affirmation other than his scarlet face. "O Ralph, how have you deceived me!" said she, smothering a desire to shriek with laughter. "Ma'am, I give you my word he offered marriage, swore a hundred tender vows, plagued me to death—well! I believe you must have seen him kiss me, but now?"

"I did, ma'am," responded Dolly, divining with feminine intuition what the other girl would be at. "That is, I believe he calls it kissing. 'Tis monstrous like a boy at bob-apple!" She glanced demurely at the writhing Ralph.

"O ma'am, how can we punish him?" cried Julie, running to Dorothy and catching her hands. "'Tis the most false-hearted knave, the most perfidious popinjay! Trust me, he needs a lesson!"

"Lud, we can wed another!" suggested Dolly. "Two others, ma'am!"

Their dancing eyes met and they broke into peals of merry laughter, while Carew, feeling like a drowning man who suddenly touches solid ground, lifted his shamed head to stare, unable to believe that he was free.

"Sir!" Dolly curtsied to the petal-strewn turf, gurgling with laughter. "I have the honor to refuse your hand. Your heart, I think, was never in question!"

"Sir!" giggled Julie, recovering. "I grieve to decline your honorable proposal. Doubtless time alone will heal your shattered heart. Come, dear, let us leave him for five minutes!"

Arm in arm they swept out through the arch of yew, flushed faces turned in dainty malice to catch a last glimpse of their rejected cavalier. Their laughter floated back to him over the hedge, mingled with a scrap of song:

*"How happy could I be with either,
Were t'other dear charmer away—"*

Young Carew picked up his hat, shook a fallen petal out of the crown and glanced upward into the flowering apple tree.

"Good gad!" said he piously, and mopped his brow.

CHAPTER XXIV

IN THE WEST WING

FROM the depths of depression Ralph swung naturally enough to the other extreme. If by no exertions of his own he was out of the wood, still he was out. He hallooed, mentally he slapped himself upon the back. He was a monstrous clever fellow. Gad, 'twas good to be alive, and young. But he would have a care how he conducted with women in future. Sly creatures, for ever making long eyes at men, and yet—who could blame 'em, after all!

He clapped on his hat, settled his cravat, shot his ruffles, and marching out of the close came face to face with Cavanagh.

"What the deuce!" exclaimed young Carew, recoiling.

Larry grinned. "Faith, 'tis not a pretty welcome at all, but sure, I startled ye. You've seen Miss Forrest?"

"I have," returned Carew, and in spite of himself his ears began to burn afresh.

The Irishman grew rigid. "In the position I hold as friend o' the family—what there is left on't!—an' her father bein' abroad the way he can't

look after her, I've a notion I should call ye out," said he grimly.

"Zoons! She's formally refused me!" cried Ralph.

"Indeed?"

"Yes, faith! But now."

"Well, I always said Dolly was no fool!" Cavanagh relaxed and held out his hand. "I congratulate ye, on me soul I do! Ye were in the deuce of a cleft stick, by all accounts. Oh, I know more than you've told me, for all your pink ears! Well now, there's just one point—faith, I might almost be callin' it a condition of me silence. This tale would be meat an' drink to Bath, an' it thirstin' for a fresh scandal!" Lazily his hand fell on the hilt of his sword, and angry as Carew was he thought better of it, and held his tongue. "'Tis this," went on Cavanagh persuasively. "To preserve friendly relations an' to prevent any misfortunate understandings that might otherwise occur, you'll present me an' Miss Forrest to your guests yonder, as friends of yours—or mere acquaintances, if it likes ye better—met here by a lucky chance as we was travelling into Sussex. We dine with you, me boy, an' view the house after."

"Is that all?" cried Ralph, mightily relieved. "Pho, sir, a bagatelle! 'Tis granted, But gad, 'tis a delicate matter. Miss Forrest—we must have a care for her good name, you—"

"O lud, I'm her doting uncle!" said Larry, and forthwith was led to the group upon the terrace.

Throughout dinner Ralph was the soul of delicacy, endeavoring to hide his jubilation for fear of wounding the two ladies' feelings: though, truth to tell, they seemed as rejoiced as he at their escape from the toils of matrimony.

Seated upon his either hand they laughed together behind his back; bent across him to exchange trivialities, white shoulders brushing his sleeve, curls dangling against his very cravat, gay, provoking, altogether irresistible. Robin Hazelhurst made boyish love to Dorothy, elated that she had entrusted him with the secret of her gypsying. Philip Lashmar ogled Julie; while Lucy and Colin Carmichael had eyes only for each other, what time Lucy was not flirting with Harry Wallace.

At the foot of the table the Squire and Cavanagh discoursed heatedly on fox-hunting, cocking, the breeding of game birds and a dozen other topics of mutual interest: and if the Squire's eyes wandered for an instant in the direction of Miss Forrest, Cavanagh would state something so abjectedly absurd as to arouse all Hazelhurst's sporting instincts, and they were at it again, hammer and tongs; so that there arose no opportunity of comparing Dorothy with a certain pretty peddler wench.

Dinner ended, Ralph must conduct his guests over the house.

Marsh held the door. "You'll find it all open, Mr. Ralph," said he dejectedly. "'Tis parlous damp, sir, through not being lived in regular. It's all open, sir, all but the west wing."

"And why not the west wing?" asked Miss Carmichael, Eve-like desiring only that which was forbidden. "Is it haunted?"

"'Tis *never* thrown open to—inspection, ma'am," mourned the butler. "'Tis one o' the rules. Sir Julian liked it kep' private."

"But rat me, my good man! Now Sir Julian's dead we're not bound by his wishes!" cried Ralph. "Of course we must see the west wing. I particularly desire it. 'Tis there the heir always lives," he added, turning to Julie.

"'Twas one o' the rules, sir," deprecated Marsh, leading the little procession to the great drawing-room. "Are ye wishful that I should come, sir, to tell about the pictures?"

Knowing next to nothing of them himself, young Carew agreed, and the butler potted slowly round one paneled room after another, recounting the glorious deeds of long-dead Carews until Julie yawned behind her fan and the gentlemen ceased to raise their quizzing glasses at every portrait.

Having succeeded in boring them below-stairs, Marsh climbed to the gallery. "The west wing," said he, and made to pass the head of the wide corridor.

"We'll see it," insisted Ralph. "Come, Marsh, don't be an old fool. I'm master here, an't I?"

Subdued, snuffling like a chidden dog, the servant produced keys from a casket on a window-sill, ostentatiously blew the dust from them and opened

one door after another, revealing shuttered, sheeted rooms, dank and lonely.

Coming into Dorothy's boudoir Miss Carmichael sniffed audibly, tilting back her pretty head. "Lud, I could swear I smell violets!"

Since all Dolly's posies were hid beneath the bed, this was scarcely wonderful.

"Can ye, ma'am?" sighed Marsh. "Ay, ay. Some can, an' some can't, not if they sniffs ever so. Can ye, indeed, ma'am? Mebbe ye can see something?"

"La, no!" gasped Julie, clutching at young Lashmar for protection. "'Tis too dark."

Shutters and curtains obscured the windows, but in the half-light the white-draped furniture loomed, ghostly.

"Shall I open a window, ma'am?" suggested the butler.

"Heavens, no! There's nothing, I'm convinced there's nothing!" Julie fluttered out and the rest of the party trailed after; and blinking in the light of the corridor, moved on.

"The library," says Marsh, coming to a reverent halt before a door. "This room, ladies and gentlemen, this very room was, as you might say, sacred to the owner of the house. A sanctum, they call it. Here Sir Rudolf wrote his famous history of the Civil Wars in nine wollums bound in calf on the third shelf to the left as you enter. Here Sir Julian liked to doze of an afternoon, and here—"

"Well, open the door and let us see," ordered Ralph with very natural impatience.

"I reelly couldn't take upon meself—" began Marsh, and was shouldered aside by young Carew.

"This is intolerable!" he cried. "Am I to be bearded in my own house? Let me pass, you doddering old imbecile!" He flung open the door and beckoned the others. "Come in! Come in! This is the library. Some of our finest portraits are—Good gad!"

From the desk before the oriel a languid figure rose, a tall exquisite in creamy brocade, fair curls falling about a powdered face. Back to the light, he stood, regarding the intruders with half-closed, indolent eyes.

"Valerius, by gad!" shouted Ralph and leaped forward. "So 'tis here you've been hiding all the time, you skulker! I arrest you on suspicion of murder. Your sword, you hound—your sword!"

None but Cavanagh, Dorothy and the butler was aware that a warrant was out for the arrest of Valerius, and dumb with amazement the guests stood huddled around the doorway, standing a-tiptoe, craning their necks to get an uninterrupted view of this extraordinary scene.

"Pray come in," drawled Valerius without moving. "Come in and shut the door. There's a prodigious draught, and my papers—thank you, Marsh."

Somewhat at a loss, Ralph hesitated, annoyed that

a dramatic moment should end thus tamely. It occurred to him that cold scorn would now be more impressive than bluster. He proceeded to cold scorn.

"You damned villain," said he, advancing. "What of my uncle's death?"

"What indeed?" countered Valerius. "Is it true, coz?"

"True? You killed him!"

"You amaze me." Valerius glanced at the intrigued spectators. "Your guests are standing, coz. Ladies, your most devoted. Be seated, I beg. Gentlemen, yours to command." He bowed, completely master of himself and the situation. "Marsh, set chairs. Ralph, be good enough to present me."

Followed introductions, bows, curtsies; the men excited and eager for trouble; the girls a-flutter with surprise and apprehension.

"Now," said Valerius, swinging his chair round and seating himself back to the desk and the window. "Now let us hear more of this astounding accusation. In a retired life, coz, any mild sensation is veritably a god-send." He disposed a cushion more conveniently in the small of his back and crossed his legs, smoothing a crease from one silk ankle.

"Gad, your airs'll not save you!" cried Ralph, fuming. "Consider yourself under arrest, sir!"

"Possibly you have a warrant?" murmured his cousin.

A much-creased paper was snatched from Ralph's

pocket and brandished beneath Valerius' pale nose. He took it, opened it, read it with interest.

"Lud, very curious!" said he; and ignoring Ralph turned toward the Squire who, blue eyes snapping with amazement, was leaning forward in his chair. "Mr. Hazelhurst, I believe you are a magistrate?"

"I have that honor," replied the Squire.

"Then, sir, if 'twould not be disagreeable to you, might I suggest that you conduct this—inquiry?"

"With pleasure, Sir Valerius, with pleasure!" The Squire bounced up, seized a small table and planted it in front of his seat. "Informal, deuced informal. But at your request, sir, I'm willing to oblige. A little elbow room, Lucy, my dear. Now, pens? Ink? Paper—ah, thank'ee, Marsh, thank'ee. Now let's see this warrant." He read it through, frowning, puckering his mild lips in deliberation. "Hum, this seems in order. Carew, let's hear your statement."

Ralph, on his feet with alacrity, shot his ruffles, snuffed, and wished the room were lighter.

"I was not present at Sir Julian's death, sir," he began. "I left the house before my cousin in order to attend the Rooms—"

"Which house? What rooms?" snapped the Squire. "Demme, Carew, have the goodness to be explicit."

"Gad, sir, I forgot you know nothing of it," said Ralph.

"Not a word, sir. Not a word. My mind's a perfect blank, as all good judges' should be."

"Sure, they are!" interposed Cavanagh, and the court had to be called to order.

Then, concisely as he could, Ralph told the story of the night of his uncle's eightieth birthday: of the old man's angry disgust at Valerius and his foppish ways: of the coming of Valerius, and of how he had left them together. Then of the major-domo seeking him at the Rooms, and telling him how he had found Sir Julian dead upon the floor and Valerius fled.

"You've no direct evidence of foul play," said the Squire at length.

"Harris overheard—"

"That's not direct evidence."

"No, sir. But Harris overheard Sir Julian swear he'd break the entail in my favor," returned Ralph. "He did not live to do it. If Valerius were innocent, why did he fly?"

A movement of spurred interest fluttered over the little assembly.

The Squire turned to Valerius. "Now, sir, if you'll favor us with your side of the story, we may learn why ye fled."

"'Tis little I have to tell, sir," responded the baronet, rising to lean wearily upon the back of his chair. "'Tis true I arrived too late to dine with my uncle. 'Tis true I refused to drink with him, but that, I assure you, was not because I wished him ill, but because I—in fact—wished myself well."

"That proves—" began Ralph.

"Good lack, coz, it proves nothing! If I'd offered to drink Sir Julian's health in water, he might have found cause for offense, but am I to make myself a sewer for fear of wounding another's convention?"

"Demmed unusual!" said Carmichael in an audible aside to Harry Wallace. "Sounds devilish as if the fellow were in training!"

Valerius appeared to lean even more heavily upon the carved chair. "I thank you, sir, for that word," he drawled. "I' faith, 'tis true. I was in training." With one abnormally white hand he flicked a speck of dust from his cuff and gazed with half-shut, lazy eyes at the astonished Colin.

Ralph shouted with laughter. "O lud, in training! Valerius in training? Pho, nonsense! 'Tis absurd! If you knew him as—"

"And what followed?" quoth the Squire, flapping his hand at Ralph for silence.

Valerius considered. "Oh, we talked. My uncle was pleased to be invidious. He called me—if my memory serves—a brainless ass, a booby, a—let me see—a flaccid nonentity, with other things I'll refrain from repeating in company. But what though? He was an old man, and my relative. I let it pass. My calm appeared to infuriate Sir Julian. He foamed, sir, positively foamed, and fell into what can only be described as a frenzy. I rang for his butler who gave him some draught he kept in readiness for such attacks. Harris

opened the windows, and as Sir Julian began to revive, I sent the servant away to give the necessary orders."

"What orders?" growled Ralph suspiciously.

"Why to be sure, to have his bed warmed and the doctor summoned. While Harris was gone my uncle recovered amazingly, sat up, knew me, and again began to rage and fume. I attempted to soothe him, but my efforts seemed to augment his choler. He threw an orange at my head and ordered me out of the house. Fearful for his health if I persisted to remain—I left."

"What was Sir Julian doing at that moment?" asked the Squire.

"He stood by the table, holding on by one hand and shaking the other in my face. 'Twas my last sight of him."

"None saw you leave?"

"I believe not, sir."

The Squire hesitated, twirling a quill between finger and thumb. "Yet had you passed through the hall, surely a footman, some servant—"

"I did not, sir. Gad, I was so monstrous upset, I forgot myself so far as to leap out of the window."

"But—(Carew, have the goodness to hold your tongue! I'm conducting this inquiry.) But tell me, Sir Valerius, if you were innocent, why did you hide?"

For a long time Valerius remained motionless, his head bent, his fingers clutching the back of his

chair as though some precious thing were about to slip from his grasp. He appeared to be considering, weighing one momentous alternative against another.

At length, sighing, he looked up, his wide eyes cavernous in the pallor of his face.

"Gad, sir, 'tis a long story," he said wearily.

"Yet must we hear."

"'Twould tax your belief to—"

"Yet, tell us."

"I did not hide!" he said in a ringing voice. "I went to my lodging and changed my dress and was present at a supper given by his patrons to the gypsy boxer, Merodach!"

"Faith, I can bear witness to that!" cried Cavanagh.

"I heard nothing of Sir Julian's death until next morning, when Mr. Cavanagh himself brought the news." For the fraction of a second Valerius' glance rested on Dorothy.

"'Tis true, sir," affirmed Cavanagh.

But from her seat beside Julie Carmichael, Miss Forrest rose, white, gasping from the shock of sudden enlightenment. "You—you *are* Merodach!" she cried, swaying, her hands at her throat. "You are Merodach!"

"I am Merodach!" said Valerius Carew.

"What—what's this?" spluttered the Squire, staring.

"Good ged, *Merodach?*" shouted Colin Carmichael.

With one accord the men sprang to their feet vociferating, "Prove it! Prove it!"

"If the ladies permit," drawled Valerius, smiling.

"Prove it, Merodach," cried Dorothy.

Like a lightning flash he straightened up, whipped off coat and waistcoat, pulled his ruffled shirt over his head and stood, naked to the waist, rubbing his powdered face clean upon the yellow curls of his great wig. Laughing, he tossed the mass of hair into the corner and stretched his mighty arms; and threw back his dark head like a colt released from the halter.

Modest squeaks from the girls, who nevertheless gazed admiringly at him from behind spread fans: shouts and laughter from the men, who crowded round to shake his hand: tears of joy from old Marsh: disgusted grunts from Ralph: the library was a pandemonium for five palpitating minutes.

"But even now," shouted Ralph as soon as he could make himself heard above the hubbub. "Even now, you han't proved you had no hand in—hastening Sir Julian's end!" In the face of this lithe fighter he hesitated to use the word "kill."

"You're right, coz," laughed Valerius—or Merodach, which you will—dressing with the aid of Robin. "No, not that damned wig, lad. Never again! Here, Marsh, use this for a foster-mother when that broody hen hatches out!" He flung the flaxen wig in the butler's grinning face, and turned to Ralph. "Mr. Cavanagh has a document will interest you. Cavanagh?"

The Irishman spread Janet's statement before the Squire, who pored over it intently.

"The woman would appear before a magistrate and swear to this?" said he, looking up.

"She will, sir. But I've proved the truth of her story. I went to the house and looked from the window of the gaming room. Faith, ye can see everything that goes on in Sir Julian's dining-room, just as she says."

"Then, if you'll listen to advice, Carew," said the Squire, rising with an air of finality, "you'll pop your ridiculous warrant behind the fire, and say no more about it."

Ralph hesitated, screwed the paper into a ball and threw it upon the hearth, his handsome young face clearing. "Gad," said he, thrusting a hand toward his cousin, "I owe you an apology, Val. I was mad to doubt you, but you'll admit I'd cause."

Valerius laughed and clapped him on the back. "I'll forgive your suspicions, Ralph, if you'll forgive my deception. But—you know my boyhood was spent abroad. Can't you realize how tedious was life in such a place as Bath after gypsying half over Europe? I came to England ready to live as other men of my station. But two months in London—two weeks in Bath and Tunbridge! Faugh, I was bored, nauseated! I longed for the clean wind in my face and the open sky above my bed. I returned to my gypsyhood."

"But your disguise—your fair wig?" said Ralph, puzzled. "Didn't Sir Julian—?"

"Oh, I was a month in England before I saw my uncle. Even in so short a time I knew I never could endure such an existence, and 'twas simpler to act a part for a day or two now and again, than for months together. Sir Julian would never have forgiven me had I gone wandering in my own person, hence—Merodach."

"And nobody knew?" cried Julie Carmichael.

"None would have understood. None but old Marsh, and he could sympathize, having loved and served my father. I got him installed here as butler, and used to walk over when Bath palled."

"But sure, someone must have suspected?" insisted the Squire.

"Oh, I'd two lodgings in Bath. One for Valerius Carew in Gay Street, one for Merodach up an alley behind the meat market. I kept no valet, and I took enormous pains that none should see me come and go. 'Twas tiresome, but 'twas worth it."

"But you needn't have turned prize fighter! Demme, Val, han't you any self-respect?" complained Ralph, never at ease when the conventions were disregarded.

Valerius stared at him, shrugged, and broke into a laugh.

"Faith, lad, you've a lot to learn," said he and turned to the others, his eyes wandering until they rested upon Dorothy. "Truly, friends, Merodach is the real man. Valerius Carew—the fop who han't enough energy to kill a fly—aha, that rankles,

my lady!—he was the disguise. The boredom wasn't assumed, I can assure you. Gad, how I loathed Bath! But for my uncle's sake 'twas necessary, now and again, to endure it. Bath got more amusement out of Valerius than I did!" Again he looked across the little assembly to Dorothy—Dorothy wide-eyed, flushed like a cottage rose, trembling under his glance. "Shall we tell them, sweet?" he said, and went to her with such a light of happiness in his face that none waited to be told.

Cavanagh shouted: the Squire, remembering a spring night thirty years ago, trumpeted into his hanker and stammered incoherent congratulations. The two girls and Dorothy clasped and kissed in a laughing triangle, and the men were so evidently thirsting to drink healths that Marsh, unbidden, brought up the last of old Sir Antony's port.

"Miss Forrest!" cried Ralph, bowing above his glass. "Let me be the first to wish you joy, you—you maddening creature! Gad, I've a mind to take a leaf out o' your book, ma'am, and demand an explanation!"

Dorothy gave him her hand. "Thank you, coz," said she demurely, her eyes dancing behind their lashes in a way that he remembered. "And by the bye, touching a certain challenge which you accepted—'tis withdrawn."

"You broke your vow?" he cried, teasing her.

She shook her head. "But I dare swear you slept within a house last night."

"At the Manor," he admitted. "But you?"

"I had an apple-tree for roof. 'Twas heaven to look up and see the stars behind the blossom."

"Demme, you're well matched!" cried the Squire. "Shall you turn gypsy, my dear, and tramp your honeymoon?"

Dorothy looked up: Valerius looked down, and smiled as their eyes met. "Yes, sir. We intend to finish our interrupted journey into Sussex," said he, and twinkled. "To-morrow!"

"To-morrow?" whispered Dorothy, flushing, hesitating, as maids will, on the brink of wifedom.

"To-morrow?" shouted the Squire, young Carew, and Miss Hazelhurst's three adorers.

"Why not?" said Valerius. "Why should we wait? Here are bride and groom and guests assembled. As soon as I knew from Larry that I was cleared I packed a lad off for my old friend—" he broke off as the door opened.

"His Reverence Father Ignatius, sir," said Marsh.

THE END

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